Ann Keniston • Emily Meier • Susan Sterling

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VOL. 282, NO. 5

NORTH AMERICAN

REVIEW

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University of Northern Iowa
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Entries may be carried out in any medium or combination of media, in any colors with the exception of metallic or fluorescent pigments. (No photographs, please.) Entries must be the proportion of the cover of the *NAR* (8 1/8 inches wide by 10 7/8 inches high). To facilitate color separation, the original artwork should measure no wider than 19 inches and no higher than 25. All entries must anticipate the contrast required for the superimposition of the magazine logo across the top portion of the illustration.

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There are no entry fees. The winner of the competition will receive a check for $300, published credit, a one-year subscription to the *NAR* and 50 tear sheets of the finished cover.

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Web Notes

To Perry Glasser:

I enjoyed reading your article (and sidebar) in the NAR [May/August 1997]. I can't see any reason, so far, why the Web will necessarily change our ideas of who's a poet, a writer. There have always been plenty of bad books—really bad poetry, junk fiction, and even more ludicrous nonfiction from pseudoscience to self-help—and plenty of people with uninformed opinions. Few of us believe everything we read, or even bother to read most of what's out there—either in cyberspace *or* in the bookstores, on the newsstands.

I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing that anyone can publish. If it means more people will read and write, so much the better. Do you think the mere volume will debase the value of everything? I guess I'm trusting that, with so much information available, we'll all have to develop some bases for choosing what to read and what to take seriously....I don't generally look to the Web to find fiction, but when I do, I go to Web pages of established journals whose editors have applied some traditional selection criteria. (I use the same screening process for scientific texts.)

Yes, I suppose the Web is "slow, slow, slow," as you say. But compared to what? Our wildest dreams? When I need some specific information, if it's something the Web can provide, then the Web is by far the fastest way to get it. It would take me at least three hours, probably more, to get to and from the library and find what I want. I can be on and off the Web, having downloaded the same information, in five to ten minutes, provided I don't dally, get sidetracked. And there's a big temptation to do that, I admit—but you should see me in a library! I'm even more prone to browsing there and frequently lug home a pile of books that have nothing to do with my original errand.

Maybe I've been lucky with my electronic searches; maybe I've been discriminating in terms of the kinds of information I look for electronically—or maybe not discriminating enough. Here's a sampling of items I've recently wanted to find and that I did find, quite efficiently, via the Web:

- Abbreviations scientists use for infrared light-emitting diodes
- A recipe for key lime cheesecake
- Articles on drowning deaths among children
- How to grow bean sprouts
- Transcripts of NPR essays by Tim Brookes
- A list of books on oral scientific presentation
- An audiotape of stories by Edgar Allan Poe
- Why the red has disappeared from my computer monitor
- A list of music festivals in southwestern Louisiana
- A list of publications by David Bradley
- What Perry Glasser does for a day job

Thanks for your article and the provocative questions you raise there.

clark@salus.med.uvm.edu

Dear Mr. Glasser:

I was so delighted by your piece in NAR that I thought I would respond. One of the most interesting points you raise is *authority* on the Web. Your example of links from J. Joyce to the Grateful Dead is not only instructive of the strange links one may come across—although not really as strange as you imply—but also of the authority issue. For instance, as you may or may not know (depending upon the extent of your diving into the wreck of Dead-dom), in the Dead world, there is no real authority other than, perhaps, band members and the occasional author—although they too are suspect. This is nowhere more apparent than on the Web. For instance, I have downloaded posted song lyrics which have been wrong (for instance, an obviously wrong lyric, "You may meet the face of Ophelia sleeping and penchant to dream." The poor Deadhead knows not his Shakespeare. There are many more authoritative mistakes like this; it is emblematic of the "democracy" of the web. But in a democracy, as not in literature, for instance, any interpretation is as good as another

I congratulate you on your interesting piece. For in it, as you may or may not have intended, you created your own authority. If I were ever to come upon it on the Web, I might even accept it for this reason. Your allusions to particular authors gives the piece the authority in my mindset so that I would be apt to accept the piece. I particularly liked the image, culled from Borges, of Alexandria's library pages strewn on its floor. It reminded me of a conclusion to a seminar on Finnegans Wake which began with a distribution of torn pages of the book. Anyhow, you created your own authority by citing certain knowledge. Maybe this is the answer to authority which you raise.

Shermanmls@aol.com

To: pglasser@tiac.net

I picked up my first copy of NAR recently and two things happened. First, I read your essay, which covers some ground I've been mulling over myself, and second, I marked your reference to David Bradley, who has been haunting me since I was a student of his a few years ago at Temple University and has been on my mind lately.

I was thinking about the Web and specifically books, and how hard it is to read text on a screen. You don't *read* text on a computer screen, you

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Mark Twain and Heaven's Gate

CYNTHIA D. SCHRAGER

IN THE WAKE of the startling mass suicide by the 39 members of Heaven's Gate in late March, timed to permit cult members to "shed their containers" and rendezvous with a UFO they believed was following the Hale-Bopp comet, a rumor immediately circulated about a possible karmic connection between the cult's dramatic exit and the spirit of that beloved American eccentric Mark Twain. In a sidebar to its Heaven's Gate coverage headlined "Twain, Comets and the Cost of Eternity," *The San Francisco Chronicle* ran a photo of Twain in the trademark white suit of his later years, and offered an intriguing explanation for one of the more bizarre details to emerge about the cult's final hours: the presence of a five dollar bill and three quarters on the bodies of deceased cult members. The *Chronicle* quoted Bufo Calvin (a contributing editor to *Strange* and creator of the *Bufo's Weird World* newsletter) on a possible Twain-Heaven's Gate connection: "Twain was very cynical about religion, and once wrote that the fare to get to heaven on the tail of a comet was $5.75."

Twain lovers may find the quote entirely in character; however, "It ain't so," says Robert Hirst, Director of the Mark Twain Project, speaking by telephone from his desk, deep within the labyrinthine corridors of the University of California at Berkeley, where he oversees the publication of the definitive edition of the complete works of the American literary icon. Together with colleagues, Hirst failed to find substantiation of a similar *New York Post* quotation posted on the Mark Twain Forum, an Internet bulletin board for Twain scholars and fans. According to Hirst, "The quotation does not appear in any version, published or unpublished, of 'Captain Stormfield's Trip to Heaven' [the source quoted by the *Post*] and probably doesn't appear anywhere else in Twain's writing."

Still, a connection between Twain and Heaven's Gate isn't as off-the-wall as it might seem.

IN THE PAGES OF the *North American Review* and *Cosmopolitan* about a century ago, Twain published articles he later included as part of a book-length diatribe called *Christian Science*. In it, Twain took on another home-grown American spiritual movement with the same unrepentant glee and razor-sharp satire he surely would have aimed at Heaven's Gate, given half a chance. Replete with fears of proto-fascist takeovers, anxieties about dangerous new technologies and sexual paranoia, Twain's turn-of-the-century writings on Mary Baker Eddy and her Christian Science Church are among the most devastating satirical rants on American spiritual and psychological fads ever penned—and, not surprisingly, they anticipate the contemporary reaction to Heaven's Gate. When it comes to anything that smacks of the occult, similar fantasies and fears have been circulating in American culture for at least 100 years.

At the turn of the last century, Eddy's religious movement was enjoying tremendous popularity, recruiting its mostly female converts with the appealing message that disease, pain and death are all in the mind. In *Christian Science*, Twain predicted that Christian Scientists would be a "political force" in American politics by 1920, by 1930 "politically formidable" and in 1940 "the governing power in the Republic—to remain that, permanently." In "The Secret History of Eddypus, The World-Empire," an unfinished manuscript he worked on at about the same time, Twain goes so far as to imagine a dystopian society set 1000 years in the future in the former United States, now ruled by a repressive global politico-religious regime formed out of the merger of the Christian Science and Roman Catholic Churches.

In hindsight, Twain's paranoia seems more than a little hysterical. Yet Twain really thought he had reason to be alarmed by the rapid growth of the Christian Science movement, especially because of its unprecedented access to new and powerful communications tools, part of the accelerated industrial change that characterized late-nineteenth-century America. In *Christian Science*, Twain sees "the railway, the telegraph, and the subsidized newspaper" as sinister mediums of control the Boston Christian Science Trust could use for "watching and managing" its empire. With the aid of new information networks and technologies never before available, the Trust, Twain feared, would consolidate its already formidable power, helping to make it "the most insolent and unscrupulous and tyrannical politico-religious master that has dominated a people since the palmy days of the Inquisition."

While Twain's anxieties about the railway and telegraph may seem quaintly amusing today, it's hard to avoid noticing, in the wake of the reaction to Heaven's Gate, how strongly our own paranoias still resemble his. Early news media reports that Heaven's Gate supported itself designing Web pages under the name "Higher Source," as well

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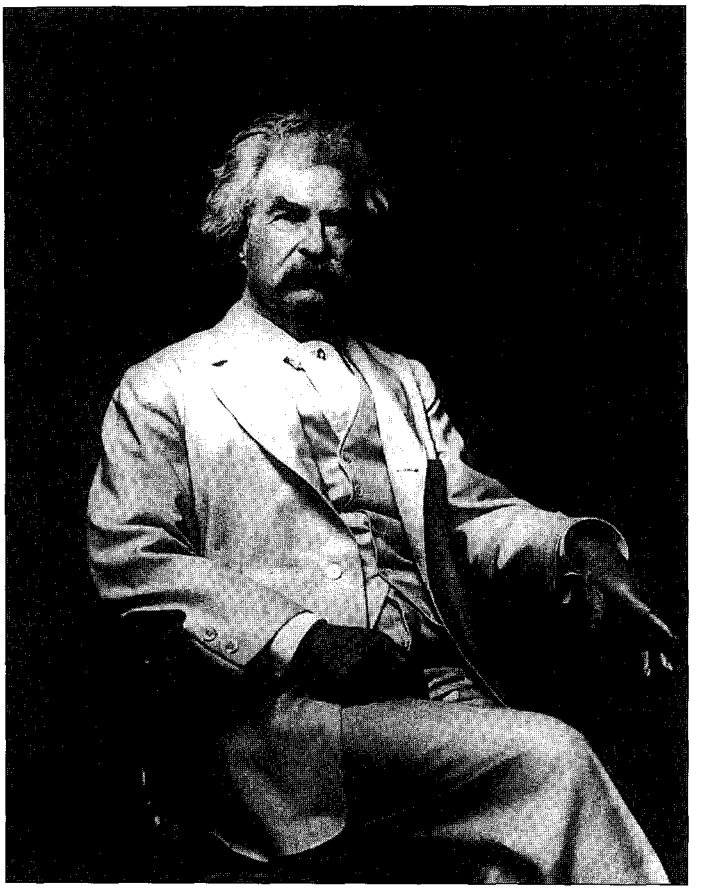
as maintained its own Website to spread its spiritual message, unleashed a torrent of contemporary anxieties about the World Wide Web as a dangerous brainwashing tool—a breeding ground for insidious global conspiracy and assaults on democracy, individualism and freedom. While cultural commentators rushed to defend the Net as just another value-free communication tool, the hue and cry made apparent the deep ambivalence about the Information Superhighway that simmers just below the seemingly placid surface of our increasingly hyperlinked lives.



IRONICALLY, DESPITE Twain's alarmist fears about Eddy as the brilliant female mastermind behind a world-wide totalitarian takeover, it is sometimes maddeningly difficult to distinguish Twain's theories about mind over matter from Eddy's own. Late-nineteenth-century American culture was awash in spiritualist and psychological crazes that not only rivaled our own: they spawned them. Mind-cure, New Thought, Theosophy, Christian Science, spiritualism and psychical research were just a few of the members of the tangled family tree that produced the contemporary New Age movement's spiritual and therapeutic fads. Heaven's Gate cult leader Marshall Herff Applewhite's eclectic New Age theology may have borrowed its technological theory and jargon from contemporary science fiction fantasies, but it had its spiritual roots planted firmly in Twain's century.

Twain's relationship to the occult fads that permeated his America was marked by a contradictory mixture of curiosity and skepticism. Twain actually dabbled in "mind-cure" remedies for many years, seeking relief from various minor physical complaints, and recommended that his ailing daughter Suzy consult a Christian Scientist. After Suzy's death, Twain and his wife Olivia visited spiritualists on at least two occasions in unsuccessful attempts to communicate with her beyond the grave. Even after he soured on Christian Science (Eddy's belief that illness is in the mind must have particularly galled him after the death of his daughter), he contradicted himself and infuriated the editors of the prestigious *Philadelphia Medical Journal* by conceding in a *North American Review* article (later incorporated into *Christian Science*) that Eddy's religion could abolish four-fifths of the world's disease. (It was apparently the other fifth he was worried about.)

In an earlier article published in *Harper's*, Twain had ventured even deeper into the turn-of-the-century American spiritual stew. Twain coined the term "mental telegraphy" to describe the mind's ability to communicate telepathically—and then offered a wealth of anecdotal evidence to prove it actually existed. If this sounds like a master of humor pulling your leg, that's just what worried Twain, who had earlier pulled the article when the *North American Review* refused to publish it anonymously, because he feared his by-line would be "the surest possible way to defeat my desire that the public should receive the thing seriously."

In "Mental Telegraphy," Twain comes across as part technological visionary and part spiritual guru, prophesying the invention of a cross between the Internet and a psychic crystal ball. Predicting that the slowness of the telegraph and telephone would soon render them obsolete, he dreamed up the word "phrenophone" (literally "mind-speech") to describe a hypothetical invention that would harness the "finer and subtler form of electricity" that "conveys our thoughts through the air from brain to brain."

Twain's theory of "mental telegraphy" has a decidedly occult spin, as well as a fascinating pedigree that links him not only to Mary Baker Eddy but also to Sigmund Freud. In the late-eighteenth century, Franz Mesmer, a magnetic healer whose followers accidentally "mesmerized" their patients into hypnotic trance-states (and paved the way for twentieth century neurotics and their shrinks), theorized that electricity and magnetism were mediums of the mental exchange between healer and patient. Mesmer spawned a host of nineteenth century "occult" sciences, including Christian Science and psychoanalysis itself. (Carl Jung claims, in his memoir *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, that Freud once warned him the "sexual hypothesis" was the only thing that kept psychoanalysis from sinking into the "black tide of mud of occultism.") For Twain and his contemporaries, technological innovations like electricity and telegraphy suggested the possibility of "occult" connections between physical bodies separated

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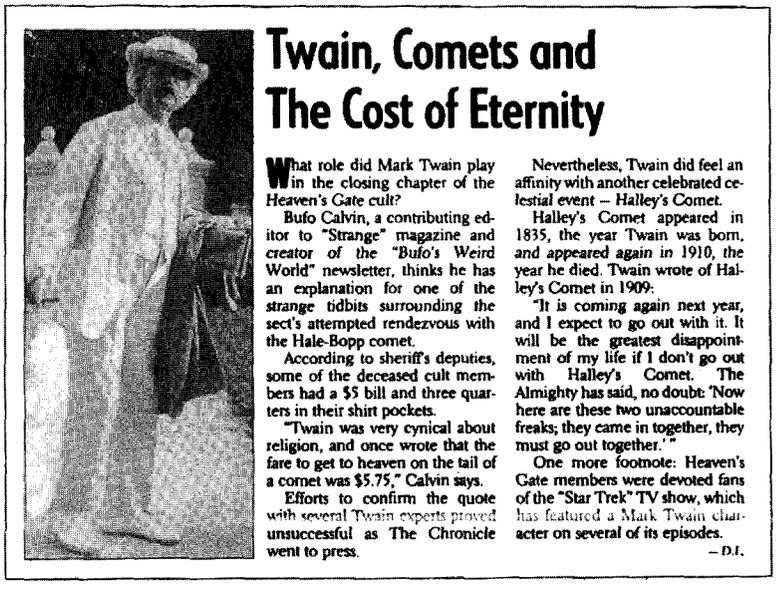
by vast stretches of land and water. Much as they do in the contemporary mix of science fiction and New Age belief that inspired Heaven's Gate, science and occultism had the unfortunate habit of blurring into one another, despite the best efforts of Freud and other seekers after scientific respectability.

Perhaps that's why Twain based one of his best-known novels, *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court*, on the premise that time-travel is just a short imaginative leap from garden-variety nineteenth-century spiritualism. (It's no accident that Twain has appeared as a character on a time-travel episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, a favorite TV show of Heaven's Gate members; the scriptwriters—English majors, no doubt—clearly saw the opportunity to pay tribute to a mentor.) On *A Connecticut Yankee's* opening page, the main character, Hank Morgan, introduces his extraordinary story of being transported back in time from the nineteenth-century United States to Arthurian England. He asks: "You know about transmigration of souls; do you know about transposition of epochs—and bodies?"



Twain, Comets and The Cost of Eternity

What role did Mark Twain play in the closing chapter of the Heaven's Gate cult?

Bufo Calvin, a contributing editor to "Strange" magazine and creator of the "Bufo's Weird World" newsletter, thinks he has an explanation for one of the strange tidbits surrounding the sect's attempted rendezvous with the Hale-Bopp comet.

According to sheriff's deputies, some of the deceased cult members had a $5 bill and three quarters in their shirt pockets.

"Twain was very cynical about religion, and once wrote that the fare to get to heaven on the tail of a comet was $5.75," Calvin says.

Efforts to confirm the quote with several Twain experts proved unsuccessful as The Chronicle went to press.

Nevertheless, Twain did feel an affinity with another celebrated celestial event – Halley's Comet.

Halley's Comet appeared in 1835, the year Twain was born, and appeared again in 1910, the year he died. Twain wrote of Halley's Comet in 1909:

"It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it. It will be the greatest disappointment of my life if I don't go out with Halley's Comet. The Almighty has said, no doubt: 'Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came in together, they must go out together.'"

One more footnote: Heaven's Gate members were devoted fans of the "Star Trek" TV show, which has featured a Mark Twain character on several of its episodes.

– D.I.

from The San Francisco Chronicle, *April 6, 1997*

LIKE THE CONTEMPORARY American schizophrenic reaction to the Internet, which we alternately laud and vilify with equal zealousness, Twain's attitude toward technology was notoriously ambivalent. Hank Morgan begins the novel as a poster-boy for Yankee individualism and ingenuity, bringing technological and democratic progress in the form of telephones, telegraphs, and newspapers to a backward and benighted Arthurian England, but he ends as the worst kind of demagogue, wreaking war-like destruction with electrical fencing, dynamite and Gatling guns in an attempt to subjugate the Arthurians to his leadership.

In the novel's horrifying finale, Twain gives us Hank Morgan as a Hitler-like figure, holed up in a cave with a loyal lieutenant and a cadre of 52 boys, retreating from the advancing Arthurian army behind a protective barrier of twelve concentric circles of electrical fencing. In a final blaze of glory, Morgan shoots the current through the electrical fencing and strikes eleven thousand soldiers dead in their tracks—a sinister twist on the nineteenth-century idea of a healing electrical or magnetic current connecting humanity. Ironically, the stench from the decomposing bodies finally infects and kills Morgan's vanguard of converts, turning the glorious war into a tragic suicide mission. Like the Heaven's Gate mass suicide, *A Connecticut Yankee* ends as a cautionary tale about the dangers of fanaticism and mind-control.

For Twain, new technologies could be utopian and dystopian, promising "occult" connection and democratic access to information on the one hand, and threatening loss of individual autonomy and control on the other. Likewise, media descriptions of Heaven's Gate as a "computer-related cult" activated Americans' underlying panic about the Internet's capacity to rob us of cherished ideals of privacy and individuality—the flip side of our utopian belief in its potential to create a democratic cybersphere to recharge our sadly eroded public sphere.

News reports lingered on the extreme regimentation of the cult's activities, including assigned seating charts for viewing approved TV shows, uniformity of members' androgynous dress and buzz haircuts, requirements that all activities were to be done in pairs, and extensive rules governing offenses from "deceit" and "sensuality" to "trusting my own judgment—or using my own mind." In a *Newsweek* interview, former cult member Richard Ford (a.k.a. Rio DiAngelo) described the proper way to approach the "overseer" of the group for so-called "individual needs" with this everyday life example: "I may be wrong, but it seems my deodorant is running out."

In the shock following the mass suicide, the Internet quickly became just one more sign of the cult's successful assault on individualism. Heaven's Gate tapped into our deepest fears about the Web as a threat to individual will and boundaries, fears that co-exist uneasily with our powerful longing to connect. The Web's extraordinary intimacy—its ability to bring the world into the very privacy of our homes—is both its lure and its terror.

IF TECHNOLOGY BECAME one of the key metaphors for talking about the terrifying loss of individuality conjured up by Heaven's Gate, then sexuality was surely another. In both cases our fears turn out to be old ones. At least since the nineteenth-century, the images we've used to describe the occult violation of the self are sexual. Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*, a classic in the nineteenth-century literature of mesmerism, is a tale of seduction that features a virginal young

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woman at the mercy of an evil mesmerist. As art mirrors life, Hawthorne once wrote to his fiancée Sophia Peabody expressing his grave concern over her interest in magnetic healing. "There would be an intrusion into thy holy of holies," Hawthorne shuddered, "and the intruder would not be thy husband!" Clearly, Hawthorne was not happy at the thought of marrying a "magnetically deflowered" bride. Few people still read George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), an extraordinarily popular book in its day, but the novel's arch-villain Svengali—a hypnotist who exerts an evil hold over the eponymous heroine—has made his way into our common parlance.

Even Mary Baker Eddy was concerned about the sinister implications of the power of mind to influence mind that formed the basis of her teachings. Despite the fact that her Christian Science theology was deeply indebted to the teachings of a mesmeric healer by the name of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, who had once temporarily cured Eddy herself, Eddy was positively terrorized by the seductive hold exerted by the (usually male) mesmerist on the (usually female) patient. In the first edition of *Science and Health*, she warns her followers about the dangerous practitioners of the "false science" of Malicious Animal Magnetism or, as she liked to refer to it, M.A.M.: "Filled with revenge and evil passions, the malpractitioner can only depend on manipulation, and rubs the heads of patients together, fairly incorporating their minds through this process.... Controlled by his will, patients hasten to do his bidding, and become involuntary agents of his schemes....You will find, the more honest and confiding the individual, the more she is governed by the mind of the operator."

Twain countered Eddy's fears of mental rape with his own sexualized paranoias. In *Christian Science*, he paints Eddy as a castrating and controlling mother figure who would "cut off" members suspected of practicing M.A.M. "When a member is not satisfactory to Mrs. Eddy," he wrote in a passage ripe with Freudian double-entendre, she has only to "cast that spiritual X-Ray of hers through his dungarees and say: I see his hypnotism working, among his insides—remove him to the block!"

Rape and castration fantasies express our terror of the loss of autonomy, perhaps because freedom of sexual expression (although not protected in the Bill of Rights) is dearest to the individual (if not the national) psyche. Heaven's Gate literalized our long-standing fears by showing us the real thing: surgical castration as the ultimate expression of the cult's long-standing injunction against "vibrating femininity or masculinity in any way." No wonder this detail, more than any other, seemed to horrify and alarm commentators. In her "Primetime Live" interview with Rio DiAngelo, Diane Sawyer completely abandoned any appearance of journalistic neutrality when she questioned DiAngelo about the cult

Mary Baker Eddy in 1892

members' apparently voluntary castrations—her face visibly registering disgust and incredulity on behalf of the watching nation.

The androgyny of the members—identical shaved heads, black tunics, dark pants and black sneakers—also disturbed and confounded our gender expectations. Early news reports incorrectly identified all of the mass suicide victims as young men. Although androgyny can be sexy when exploited by advertising executives marketing everything from unisex perfume to Calvin Klein jeans, media reports like the *Newsweek* cover photo of cult survivor Rio DiAngelo rendered androgyny as sexual deviance that signaled the loss of individuality—another version of castration fears.

In "The Secret History of Eddypus, The World-Empire," Twain equates loss of democratic freedom with loss of manhood in wild transvestite fantasies, imagining a long succession of male Popes cross-dressed as Mary Baker Eddy heading up the repressive dictatorship in the Eddypus World-Empire. No wonder the manuscript remained unfinished (and unpublished until long after his death). In *Christian Science*, Twain confines himself to tamer images. Still, he complains that Mary Baker Eddy acts more like a robber baron building a corporate empire than a properly domesticated representative of nineteenth century womanhood. She is, in his eyes, "the most daring and masculine and masterful woman that has appeared in the earth in centuries."

At the center of the Heaven's Gate affair, accounts of Applewhite's apparently violently suppressed homosexuality tapped into profound cultural stereotypes, especially paranoia about the homoerotics of the leader's control over the masses. The motif of heterosexual seduction that dominates the nineteenth century literature of mesmerism gives way in the twentieth century to the homoerotic theme of the mesmeric influence of the political tyrant. Twain anticipated this shift with his portrait of Hank Morgan and brought out the sexual subtext as well, by making the 52 boys who blindly follow Morgan to their deaths "as pretty as girls." In contexts as diverse as Hitler's Nazi youth and the U.S. military, male homoeroticism is both incited and prohibited, helping to forge the association of repressed homosexuality with fascist or authoritarian control.

BY VIRTUE OF THEIR constant and omnipresent linkage in media reports, the repeated mention of Apple-

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white's homosexuality risked being taken as the "cause" of the tragic control Applewhite exerted over his followers, and the distinction between repressed homosexuality and homosexual desire itself was always in danger of collapsing. In response to fears that the gay angle would be used in mainstream media coverage to sensationalize the mass suicide, the gay press attempted to contain the homophobia it feared would be unleashed by emphasizing the tragic consequences of Applewhite's *repressed* homosexuality. *The Advocate* ran a report under the headline "Deadly Denial," with a photo of Apple-white captioned: "Suppression of his homosexual desires was a driving force for the man who led 38 others to suicide."

Yet given the virulent persistence of the stereotype of the open homosexual as a "seducer" and a "recruiter," the battle over the characterization of Applewhite's sexuality reveals an insidious bind. If "repressed" homosexuality is identified with one kind of sinister control in our cultural imagination, then "out" homosexuality is associated with another, inspiring Svengali-like fears about the powers of seductive influence and the violation of free will. *Icon*—a San Francisco monthly that bills itself as "The Thinking Lesbian's Newsmagazine"—answered *Time* and *Newsweek*'s competing April 14 cover exclusives on Ellen de Generes ("Yep I'm Gay") and Rio DiAngelo ("The Last Insider's Untold Story") with its own "Ellen's Gate" issue. Playfully combining the two media frenzies of the hour, the *Icon* cover included the following "NEWS FLASH": "Lesbians and 'gay women' across the country have been seen dressed only in black, sporting severe short hair cuts, wearing sensible shoes and brandishing purple triangles...Could this be in preparation for the April 30 Hail-Ellen Event? ARE WE A CULT?" Playing off the similarity between the gay liberation symbol and the shrouds that covered deceased cult members as well as the cult's androgynous ("lesbian") look, the *Icon* cover acutely parodied mainstream American fears of gays as brainwashers and recruiters.

Like Twain's ambivalent and contradictory relationship to the American occult a century ago, our own relationship to Heaven's Gate is a lot more complicated than it seems. Our seemingly insatiable cultural appetite for endless spin-offs and copycats of *Star Trek*, our obsession with the *X-files*, our love of UFO movies like *Independence Day*, our revivals of *Star Wars* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, our rush to put books like *The Celestine Prophecy* and virtually any title with the word "Soul" on the bestseller list, our ongoing love affair with New Age fads and fashions from "channeling" to "vision quests" to "past-life regressions," even our fashion tastes for the androgynous "heroin chic look" are all part of the popular American culture that spawned Heaven's Gate. While we demonize the cult members or recoil in shock and horror, our own favorite entertainments look a lot like their reality, and the distance between "us" and "them" isn't as great as we might like to believe.

So why the collective gasp of horror? Perhaps we can look to Twain for a part of the answer. In his essay "Mental Telegraphy," Twain professed his belief in the ability of minds to communicate telepathically, but couldn't help betraying a distinct undercurrent of uneasiness. If people could read each other's thoughts, what would stop them from stealing each other's

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ideas? "While I am writing this," he puzzles, "doubtless somebody on the other side of the globe is writing it too. The question is, am I inspiring him or is he inspiring me?" The whole paradox clearly made Twain—the professional writer—uneasy. As someone who had fought long and hard to extend copyright law to protect the individual property rights of the author, Twain could see the dangers inherent in a "technology" that could make plagiarism as easy as, say, downloading a file. Twain may have touted the utopian possibilities of the "phrenophone," that quasi-magical, quasi-technological marvel that would connect mind with mind in ways beyond his contemporaries' wildest imagining, but even he could see there were still a few bugs in the system. Like us, he may have longed for mystical/technological connection, but not if it meant having to rethink his most deeply held beliefs about the value of autonomous individualism.

As Twain feared the railroad, the telegraph, and the "phrenophone," we mistrust the Internet. The technologies that connect us also threaten us, and we waver between utopian and dystopian fantasies, hyping global community one minute and panicking about invasions of privacy the next. We worry that our children will become easy prey to Web pornographers and perverts, but we flock to cyberspace in droves to find our own intimate and even sexual connections. Instant access to people and information seduces us, but the thought of strangers violating our social security files sends us into a tailspin. We hunger for a spiritual connection that no longer seems available in our increasingly isolated lives, but we fear the loss of the cherished privacy we've so successfully created.

At the turn into the twentieth century, Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science Church was a convenient target for all of Twain's unresolved and frightened ambivalence about the terrors of connectedness. For contemporary Americans looking straight into the eye of the millennium, Heaven's Gate may serve equally well. □

INTERACTIONS *(from page 2)*

glance at it, pick its bones for something useful. It's a utilitarian act—one that doesn't lend itself to literature. Of course, in the future you might be able to print out your own hard copy of a book or magazine, edit it, choose your own layout—but people need copy, I'm convinced of it. That's why I picked up NAR. I look at the e-zines occasionally, but they are hardly a substitute—despite hyper-text, which you can do manually anyway if you collect enough books.

However, the medium will definitely change—when the technology catches up with the vision, but it will happen. And although I share your concerns, I think in the end it will be revolutionary and liberating if the centralization of social power is broken down, if some geek on the Net has just as much say about literature as David Bradley. One of the things I remember David railing against was academic fiction—books that had an audience solely because they had been 'syllabized.' I think he took it to mean that books would die, or were already dead, if they came to be seen as something "professionals" sanctioned, all in the effort to instill virtue—moral or intellectual, and I think he's right. Literature is pretty much a closed system right now and the life blood is draining from it.

I'm not sure how much the Net will help. Although you worry about the chaos the Net might create, it ain't gonna happen. One of the first things people realized when the technology began to take off and become commercialized is that there is too much information, and brand-name recognition means more than it ever did. So, some small journal will die a slow death on the Net, but there will be tons of them and they'll sprout up all the time, because it's cheap to set up a Web page, comparatively speaking. But there won't be a revolution, and that's too bad. In the future, names like The New Yorker, Harper's, Atlantic Monthly, will all seem like simulacra, and those names in themselves will be worth fortunes.

However, the Net is terrific at one thing: communication. And it works as good right now as it ever will. I imagine your e-inbox is a testament to this. In that regard, merely sending you this says everything I think worth saying.

Comdico@aol.com

Dear Mr. Glasser:

The Internet is most definitely a democratic, perhaps anarchic, influence on the culture. It is not, however, a serious challenge to the established elites and power structures—at least not in its present form. The individual you encountered is the petty tyrant of his own little corner of the Web, and nothing more. Within his realm, he is all-powerful. Outside it, we can only guess.

The Net appeals to a particular type of person, one who resents authority and at the same time secretly wishes to *be* the authority. The potential audience for their ramblings is great; the actual audience is far less. (I don't know, but I imagine if you divided the number of Web pages by the number of visitors on the Web, the average audience would be about 2.) A large part of that audience is attracted by links and searches for information, not by the value of the content. . . .

Your metaphor, of the vulgar translations of the Bible, is apt. But the result of that revolution was not a totally democratic form of religion. Rather, new sects arose around charismatic leaders. If a new sect were to arise from the Internet, it seems unlikely it would have at its head a bitter little Napoleon like your man. His jab at you has all the effect of a letter to the editor—less, considering it was read only by you.

The Internet at present is the frontier. Its netizens are not inside the city gates but hiding out in the mountainous regions where tiny sects and strange subcultures have always thrived. Visitors to the Net are like tourists; they'll enjoy the scenery, bring home a few souvenirs, but they won't move there in great numbers. And if the frontier does get settled, it will inevitably come to resemble the city. . . .

On a side note, in my opinion the idea of interactivity, while hyped to death, is of limited interest to the general public. People don't want to find their own path through a book or make up their own endings to a movie. Interactive art forms are intriguing to artists, . . . but a bore to everyone else. . .

Andrew Snee
Raleigh, NC
(Sorry, no e-mail address)

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Vermeer's Hapless Peer

GEOFFREY BENT

FASHION UNFORTUNATELY IS immune to the influence of logic. While the virtues of one neglected artist can suddenly seem appreciated by everyone, the work of another artist of similar quality can pass before the same audience with all its neglect intact. Such seems to be the fate of the French painter Georges de La Tour (1593-1652). Exactly one year ago, the Vermeer show at the National Gallery of Art in Washington was garnering fulsome praise from all corners of the media: even fluffy magazines usually devoted to dessert recipes and dieting tips were running lengthy appreciations of "the Sphinx of Delft." One year later, the same museum carried the first solo show in this country of La Tour's work, and it slipped under the media's radar producing little more than a critical blip.

Which is a shame because in many ways La Tour is Vermeer's equal. The reputations of both artists followed the same arduous obstacle course: roughly contemporaneous (La Tour was 39 years Vermeer's senior), each artist enjoyed a degree of local esteem that vanished for several centuries at their deaths. Both had to wait until the 20th Century to be identified and appreciated for a modest oeuvre of surviving pieces (35 for Vermeer, 40 for La Tour). But the kinship between these two masters is more a matter of character than career. There are those who revere Vermeer chiefly as a purveyor of realistic surfaces, a sort of Dutch forbearer of the Wyeth clan. For them, technique is more than an end in itself; it's a *raison d'être*. While Vermeer's technique is formidable, his greatness lies in how it blends with his theme: what he achieves is indistinguishable from how he achieves it in the painterly equivalent of transubstantiation. Vermeer's finest works create the visual manifestation of contemplation. His seamless, almost brushless approach allows the eye to penetrate his scenes without distraction; simple gestures become monumental because Vermeer's transparent style surrounds them with palpable emptiness. Everyday objects are seen in the intense detail of study, transforming the world into one huge still life. Like clear, deep water, what populates his pictures can be viewed at a distance only in the absence of a turbulent style: one feels a sneeze would be enough to shatter this world beyond repair. La Tour also captures this uncanny aura of contemplation in his nocturnes, and he does it by using a similar device: limiting the light source. What a leaded-glass side window offered the Dutchman is achieved with a single candle by the Frenchman. Limiting the light source of a painting simplifies and heightens a composition: artificial lines and gestures aren't needed to focus the viewer's attention on certain details; the intensity of the existing light privileges them.

But the National Gallery show clearly demonstrates that there were not one but two distinct, almost contradictory La Tours. Where Vermeer's show revealed the limits of the artist's approach when he attempted uncongenial genres like tavern scenes or religious allegory, La Tour seemed just as adept at portraying sun-drenched low lives as shadowy ascetics. The two versions of his "The Musicians' Brawl" serve up a vivid helping of the former. The battle is confined to the two central figures and the recorder wielded by the man on the right seems to prove a more effective weapon than the small knife held by the man on the left. The reactions of the musicians surrounding the combatants run from amusement to pious dread, increasing the impression of discord in an occupation noted for its harmony. It is interesting to note that even though this scene represents La Tour's closest brush with farce, none of the five figures are presented as gross caricatures. Even the man on the extreme left appealing to heaven is rendered as an individual and not an exaggerated type. Like Velázquez's portrait of the cross-eyed jester Calabazas, humor is conveyed, but not at the expense of dignity.

This dignity infuses La Tour's portraits of poor couples and hurdy-gurdy players. The blind hurdy-gurdy man is surprisingly well dressed: despite his begging occupation, his infirmity is the only lack portrayed. In the Prado's version, the man arches his eyebrows expressively in a manner that corresponds to the emotions of his song. In the version from Nantes, on the other hand, La Tour achieves an interesting mix of unsentimental sympathy in the way he captures the raucous distortion of the man's jaw and the intense squint of the closed eyes. The rocks scattered at his feet imply that, despite the man's fine apparel, his road is a hard one.

The show revealed an interesting link between the artist's religious portraits and his rendering of secular scenes: the same creased and grizzled faces stare out of both. St. Thomas holds his spear not as the instrument of his martyrdom, but as a tradesman might handle his tools, like a butcher with a cleaver or a

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cobbler with an awl. From La Tour's perspective, the distance between peasant and prophet is not very great. As simple as the compositions are, they still offer several of the sensitive touches that signify a master: the way the linen draped over the man's shoulder and the woman's turban unite the peasant couple eating, or how the red tassels of St. Jerome's hat echo the bloody scourge that hangs from his hand.

Even when La Tour produced works in an established genre, he did so with a distinctive flare. His "Fortune-Teller" (*below*) and the pair of card cheat paintings clearly point to the Frenchman's debt to Caravag gio, yet he keeps the "joke" of each scene apparent even though his compositions are busier than the versions by his Italian predecessor. The exchange of glances between the figures in these two compositions is most remarkable: they keep the viewer zig zagging throughout the scene, heightening the suspicion between the participants while facilitating the deception of the busy hands. In "The Fortune-Teller," La Tour pairs the heads of the young man and the young woman; not only does the artist make their glances collide, he gives them the same eyes. The strength of this visual pairing captivates the viewer's attention: like the young man, we notice only later what has gone on. Like an accomplished con artist, La Tour uses distraction to facilitate deception: the old gypsy fortune-teller has the battered integrity of one of La Tour's saints: one can see why the pictured youth trusts the woman. In fact she doesn't rob the young man; her accomplices accomplish that twice. The old woman's visual authenticity is used by the artist and the thieves to bait the trap. La Tour both dupes his viewers and lets them in on the trick: from the angle the two card-cheat scenes are viewed from, the deception is readily apparent. The cheat even looks out to the viewer and reveals the cards in his hand, inviting us to share in his chicanery. Card-cheat genre painting from Caravaggio on often have a bystander as the agent of the deception: La Tour has that role occupied by his audience. All these scenes of deception are rendered in a hard, clear light that eschews the sentimentality of atmosphere and seems the perfect visual equivalent for the diligence the artist advocates.

As accomplished as these daylight scenes are, it is in his nocturnes that La Tour's genius is most powerfully expressed. As in the work of Vermeer, these paintings display the strength and efficacy of the simplest means gauged with uncanny accuracy. The air of intimacy created by the reduced light source invests a gesture or glance with all sorts of personal gravity. The repentant Magdalenes in the show (*cf. page 13*) offered the supreme expression of this. Rarely has the traditional *vanitas* genre's meditation on life's brevity through skulls and mirrors conveyed such quiet resignation. La Tour achieves this in part by capturing the almost hypnotic bond between the Magdalene and the single flame illuminating each scene. This flame comes to embody the fragility of existence, and the woman's face registers none of the pious posturing favored by other artists; rather her expression is one of melancholy inertia, perhaps the only genuine response to confronting one's mortality.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The presence of a single lit candle in so much of La Tour's work never degenerates into mechanical shtick, a self-conscious trademark that pops up in lieu of a signature. Rather, the artist varies the use and impact of this prop in subtle ways. There is some controversy over whether "The Ecstasy of Saint Francis" which appeared in the show is a La Tour original or a very good copy of a La Tour that has been lost. Either way, we have a composition that is unquestionably by this master. The "ecstasy" portrayed is obviously a seizure, and La Tour renders it with all his

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unflinching honesty: the gaping mouth, the eyes rolled back in the head, the constricted torso listing over to the right, any romantic gloss on the saint's physical condition is banished. A small, opaque shade covers the flame of the candle at the center of the scene: like the writhing holy man, this light continues to glow despite the physical eclipse.

Of all La Tour's uses of candlelight, one of the strangest has to be "The Flea Catcher." A semi-nude woman sits with a single candle perched on a nearby red chair and hunts for fleas in her open nightgown. The potential for burlesque or erotic voyeurism in such a scene is obvious and indeed almost every other artist who portrayed the activity used these approaches. Not La Tour. With an independence that borders on the contrary, the Frenchman invests the scene with a high seriousness that is remarkable. One would be hard pressed to think of another nude so unerotically rendered: neither the woman's face nor body are remotely attractive. Yet La Tour also avoids the opposite tack: his nocturnal exterminator isn't portrayed as a physical grotesque engaged in a grotesque activity. Despite the provocation of the open nightgown, the woman's naked body transcends labels like "ugly" or "beautiful" to become a mere fact. This also enables the viewer to focus on the gravity of the woman's expression. She presses her thumbs together to dispatch one of the bugs in a pose that exactly replicates the religious contrition of a woman with her rosary. The inappropriateness of this visual analogy would usually spark satire, but again the model's absolute seriousness and the simple dignity of the light banish this response. One might grope for some symbolic interpretation to justify the atmosphere, fleas representing sins that the vigilant believer constantly attempts to rid herself of, but again nothing in the scene warrants metaphoric meaning. La Tour has found dignity even in such an unpromising scenario. One walks away from this strange painting both moved and mystified, puzzled by how a scene can be enigmatic and absolutely clear at the same time.

"The Newborn child" (*below*) is perhaps La Tour's most famous picture and it's easy to see why. Has there ever been a less idealized depiction of an infant in art up to the present century? Or one that conveys such tenderness? All the frailty of this fledgling life is minutely recorded: the puffy eyes, the gasping mouth. Far from diminishing the child's appeal, this clarity enhances it: only the acceptance that comes from affection would allow a baby to be depicted with such honesty. The need to idealize suddenly seems like the need to excuse. The confining way the child is bundled makes it appear that much weaker and concentrates the viewer's attention exclusively on the face. The warm red of the young mother's dress surrounds the baby in a protective aura (no one, not even Rubens, could make red glow with the peculiar inner light La Tour gave it). The brilliant reflected stars of light in the eyes of the two women help draw out the focus of the painting from the swaddled figure illuminated at the center. The woman in attendance shields the candle with her hand: this gesture was fraught with meaning for La Tour: he used it often and always with the same significance. Figures in his work shield candles to direct their light, but in blocking the flame from the viewer, the hand becomes the source of light, held in a gesture of benediction, the spaces between the fingers glowing with almost supernatural vividness.

As modest as La Tour's surviving oeuvre is, the National Gallery show didn't include some of his finest paintings. The Metropolitan Museum's "Magdalene with Two Flames" increases the ephemeral nature of the taper by reflecting it in a mirror. The gold frame surrounding the mirror glows invitingly: this is more than a prop, this becomes

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes

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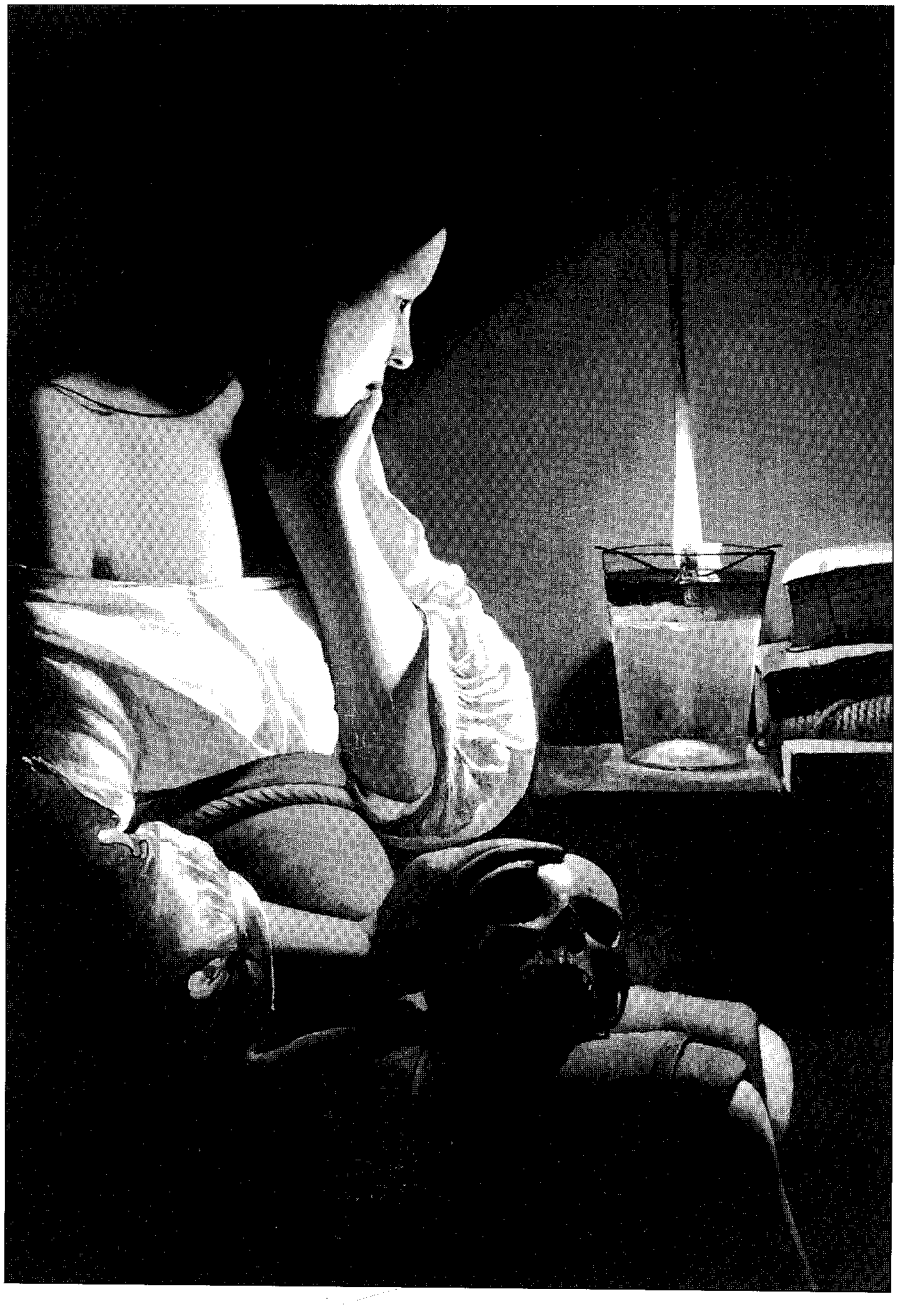
Los Angeles County Museum of Art



one of the shallow temptations life offers. The angle La Tour places his Magdalene at is significant: heretofore the figure has sat even with the flame; now she sits between the viewer and her table. The light catches only the edge of the full-length figure's red skirt, creating a crimson ribbon that leads up from the floor to the skull resting on the lap and the folded hands resting on the skull. Shadow, which envelopes most of the figure, blends seamlessly with the woman's long dark hair, and the turn of the head obscures her features in a gesture of humility that is literally self-effacing.

The Louvre's "Christ with Saint Joseph in the Carpenter's Shop" is another great picture that didn't make the show. La Tour never gauged the effects of candlelight better than in this work. The model he chose for the young Christ is marvelous: the slightly chubby features, the open expression, an ordinary face made extraordinary by the almost supernatural glow the candle gives it. This is the only picture I've ever encountered where one senses some genuine emotional connection between Joseph and his son, as the boy enables the older man to do his work by providing the light. The even greater "Dream of Saint Joseph" from Nantes also wasn't included in the show. Joseph hunches on the right with his eyes still closed and his hand on his face. The "angel" on the left reaches over to clasp his wrist, blocking the candle's flame and creating the blackest of bridges to connect the two figures. For the angel, La Tour uses the same boy he used in his painting of the young Christ, but this time the light source is much lower, and the boy is more a figure of the shadows. His extended pupil makes his one visible eye all dark. The boy is as unorthodox an angel as he was a Christ. La Tour avoids all the theatrical trappings artists clutter their angels with: no oversized wings or blond hair or celestial instruments. This is obviously a boy. The supernatural identity of the figure is registered solely through the authoritarian gesture of the left hand, so out of place for a child. The device is brilliant: a single flourish in a quiet scene conveys enormous power, similar to what the young Samuel heard in the middle of the night: the small, still voice that is God. The weird specificity of this painting goes beyond dreams into the realm of hallucination.

If visual delight wasn't justification enough for the National Gallery show, there was the added incentive of convenience. Unlike Vermeer, whose work resides in a few of the West's largest cities (one could see almost a quarter of his oils in New York City alone), La Tour's paintings are largely scattered throughout the pro-vincial museums of France (with a few as far off as Tokyo and the Ukraine). Even a piecemeal perusal would require equal amounts of determination and money. Only by bringing much of the work together can one appreciate the variations in mood and effect of an artist who superficially seemed to repeat a few pictorial devices. For those who missed the show at its two U.S. stops (the National Gallery and the Kimbell Art Museum in Ft. Worth, Texas), there is only the consolation of the handsome if slightly stuffy exhibition catalogue distributed by Yale University Press. For those lucky enough to have caught the show, the lingering memories of this master's work can only be called illuminating. □

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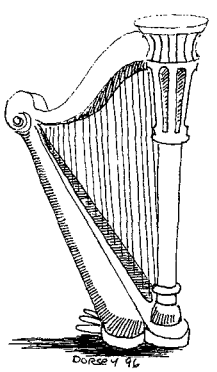
Serious and Entertaining

ROBERT L. KING

THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD, and the title of its first act, "The Disappearance of the Jews," David Mamet's new play—unlike *Oleanna* and *Cryptogram*—uses evocative language that prompts active reflection from its audience. The first words are Joey's as he leans toward Bobby seated well away from the table between them: "What I remember . . . " He repeats the line as we are apt to do in those haphazard conversations between old friends who haven't seen each other in years. As the two reminisce, they generally ignore the bottle on the table. Their eyes look out to a distant past, a past that, like the table, brings them together and stands between them. They smile, Bobby especially, in nostalgic remembrance. Their speech patterns, however, took on deeper meanings for me than the verbal tics of many other Mamet characters. Joey's repeated "They were before their time" is uttered as a comforting comment on his fellow Jews of an earlier Chicago, but its trite moralizing redounds against him in harsh judgment when the two try to recall girls they had sex with:



BOBBY: Which one was mine?
JOEY: Some Jew broad.

A tacit convention allows members of a race to talk like that about each other; it often passes for harmless, honest comment on social roles. Mamet, though, shows us where such unthinking remarks can lead. In his typical fashion, he first gets a laugh from the small talk that fills gaps in conversation:

JOEY: How is your wife?
BOBBY: Fine.
JOEY: (*beat*) How is she really?

While "Fine" holds little real meaning, Bobby's more honest reply edges toward overt racism; we are led from small talk to exclusive code: "I should never have married a shiksa." The point, subtly introduced, is painfully extended when Joey, half a century and an ocean removed from the Holocaust, confidently mouths an ignorant generalization: "If you've been persecuted so long, you must have brought it on yourself." He substitutes "oppressed" for "persecuted" later when he displays his hollow certainty by repeating the socially bland, morally obtuse formula.

As representatives of a generation without a conscience and unaware of their irony, the men can slide from one facile judgment to its opposite. Jews like them who became assimilated through material success and marriage to goys are "lost," like the old neighborhood itself. In their cozy setting, they agree that what these Jews have done in Chicago is "profaning" what the victims of the Holocaust went through. Mamet courageously links the men's sentimental nostalgia to a profoundly greater ignorance—they do not forget the millions of dead but trivialize them. The playwright dramatizes fellow Jews as racists, guilty of the sin that killed their own ancestors. When Bobby asks if the old shoe store is still there, Joey replies indulgently enough, "Oh, Bobby, it's all schvartes there now, you know that." Mamet, whose tape-recorder ear and unmoored aphorisms have often wearied me, compresses a world of disturbed and disturbing values in the dialogue between Bobby and Joey. In its full context, "schvartes" suggests how sharp and deep our social divisions are.

Only Bobby appears in all three acts of *The Old Neighborhood*. In the second, "Jolly," he is visiting his sister for the first time in years. The recurring Mamet question is raised early: "What does that mean?" and Jolly's complaints about her mother's manipulation cause Bobby to expand the meaning of a term in common usage: "If there's such a thing as abuse, we got it." Throughout the second act, Jolly's husband clearly has heard all this family angst before; his laconically perfect role is an understated dramatic argument that all the talk will accomplish nothing. Bobby spends most of Act III listening to his wife as she talks around the reasons for their separating. Again, merely talking about meaning substitutes for clarity of meaning, and this act like the three scenes of the previous one ends with one character quietly distinguishing what the other says:

BOBBY: They [our parents] didn't love us.
JOLLY: (*beat*) They loved you, Bob.

Speaking of her own children:

JOLLY: The kids will be OK.
BOBBY: We're not OK.

Jolly has told about a dream in which her mother kills her:

BOBBY: Thank God it was only a dream.
JOLLY: (*Drily*) Yes, isn't that a mercy.

In the last lines of the play:

D. (Bobby's wife): Is this goodbye, Love?

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BOBBY: Goodbye (*long pause*), love.

In a somewhat sentimental gesture, the lights go down slowly as the scene's last words are delivered, yet these quiet endings are far more telling, more trusting of the audience, than the punch-line resolutions of scenes in *Glengarry Glen Ross* and other Mamet plays. The American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge gave the world premiere of *The Old Neighborhood* the production it deserved with appropriately minimal sets and naturally restrained acting. To my mind, it is David Mamet's most challenging, most rewarding play since *American Buffalo*.

IN THE CHICAGO neighborhood where the Steppenwolf Theatre Company makes its home, attendants for valet parking share the sidewalk with a beggar. It was a good place for the world premiere of Charles L. Mee's *Time to Burn* because he accepts his street-wise subjects as they are and because the Steppenwolf supplied the right director, cast and gritty setting for his play. In his subtitle, "Inspired by Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*," Mee used the exact word, for he neither alluded to Gorky nor echoed him. Truly inspired, *Time to Burn* took a life of its own from *The Lower Depths*; one needn't know the Russian play to appreciate the timely American one. From its ambiguous title to its ambivalent ending, Mee's play stands independent outside the shadow of its famous antecedent.

Time to Burn is set in an abandoned factory; from opposite sides of the stage, two long stairways give access to the lowest level of the derelict building. One wooden flight goes to the apartment of Vinnie Pazzi, landlord of the space below, home to America's debris, people who cannot find or afford another place to live. Pazzi and his Thai wife live in the apartment along with her sister, who is a virtual prisoner and slave since her brother-in-law has her papers locked in his safe. In one of the clear Gorky parallels, the thief, Billy, is her lover and her sister's; he promises to steal the papers to effect their escape.

The death of the only character with a name common to both plays, Anna, precipitates the climactic moment of *Time to Burn*, For most of the play, she has been lying on one of several double-deck pallets while her husband buzzes on makeshift equipment in an attempt to crack the computer market, an effort that raises nothing but his hopes and monthly rent. When she dies, her body is carefully wrapped in a shroud and respectfully carried across the stage away from the metal stairs that open directly on the street. The landlord maims this pathetic ritual, blocking the way, indignant that anyone would think of carrying a body through his apartment. A scuffle erupts and Pazzi is pushed to his death. To confuse the police and protect their own, all the denizens of the factory—black, Bulgarian, Brazilian, Greek, Puerto Rican—are ready to take responsibility for killing him. When his widow fingers Billy because he has left her for her sister, she is persuaded to call the death an accident out of fear that as an Oriental she would have problems claiming the estate. And life, such as it is, goes on.

That life has been set before us like something found, outside of shaping narrative. People happen to come together out of need; character does not govern action or even behavior. The residents are the character, the sum of those who try to get along by meeting the material world on its own turf and on its own terms. Billy is a thief; Jessie, a black woman, surrounds herself with her possessions, accumulations from the street. She puts her faith in the Lord but can give comfort to Alessandra, the transvestite who delivers a detailed, very explicit description of her oral technique. Without underlining them, Mee introduces other, more ironic symbols of cultural standing: a discarded barbecue, champagne from a tapped-out gambler. *Time to Burn* is not committed to unrelieved realism. From time to time, people are lit singly across the width of the stage, and when the Actor recites Aristophanes in the original, another character follows him with a spotlight. This dramatic projection of self derives from a culture dead to most of us and in metrical sound with no present application.

The most complex of the play's realistic scenes comes when Pazzi's sister-in-law calls down to the group that, because the landlord has gone out, she will turn on the water for them. Most of them, Anna and Jessie excepted, strip naked and line up to shower; for a short time, they will be exposed, clean, defiant, dignified. Yet the communal shower inevitably recalls other chambers where dark forces controlled other undesirables. Without exploiting a far greater human tragedy, Mee forces us to realize the presence of

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one of our own. Under Tina Landau's direction, the fifteen actors inhabited the place as well as the roles. She moved the action smoothly from its more singular moments to its communal scenes of music and death. At the end, the stage emptying out, Alessandra swivels out for her night's work as Jessie sings, "My Heavenly Father watches over me." We know which character will find our society measurably rewarding: the Father watches, the john pays.

Few theaters would mount *Time to Burn*; its large cast and densely detailed set are financially daunting, all the more so as support for non-profit theaters continues to shrink. The Steppenwolf has done Charles Mee and the rest of us a great service.

THE PROGRAM NOTES for Richard Foreman's *Pearls for Pigs* instructed the Hartford Stage audience to prepare itself for an intellectual joy ride. We would be forced to re-examine our preconceptions about narrative and meaning, and we would have fun. The actors' voices are miked so that we will have to work at sorting them out; jarring, loud noises jolt us out of our passivity. Any failure to appreciate the play's screwy genius will be our fault since, as the title suggests, we are the collective pigs for the author's creative pearls. Yet, for all its disruptive flash, *Pearls for Pigs* does not challenge dramatic tradition so much as it feeds off it; it does not undermine, in the author's words, "abstract, conventional labels" so much as it leeches off the parched deconstructive field; it doesn't disorient the audience so much as it badgers it. The production notes bravely oppose *Pearls for Pigs* to "the traditional well-made play structure," as if serious dramatists had yet to attack that creaky form. An actor's prat fall when he tries to sit on "the famous imaginary seat" is circus stuff, good but hardly fresh; the distorting mirrors held up to the audience have been used to greater effect in *Death and the Maiden* and other stagings, among them an RSC *Winter's Tale*. The stage within the stage—well, we can supply examples aplenty from our own experience. We are so often provoked by Foreman that provocation becomes a bore. A bright light in the face makes us squint, but what else? Language, too, is relentlessly trendy. The dominant figure, Maestro, has the opening line, "I hate the characters who appear in this play," and the third one, "What I hate is this play." Later, he says, "You know I don't make sense, so now I make sense." The play "is the story of a man who ran out of stories." And, dear reader, this is not a pipe.

Pearls for Pigs was selected to represent the United States at the Theatre Festival of the Americas, in Montreal this spring, as the first stop on a world tour.

THE TRINITY REPERTORY presented *The Mineola Twins*, a new play by the prolific, socially aware Paula Vogel. The play is divided into three groups of two scenes each, with equal time given to the administrations of Eisenhower, Nixon and Bush. The characters are created and cast with like symmetry: one actor plays both twins; another, their sons and, in the Providence production, a third was one twin's lesbian lover and the other's fiancé. Audiences were cued to the cartoon quality of the play before an amplified voice boomed its first words: "Dream Sequence Number One." Comic strip faces on the program cover and oversized Warhol dots on the stage's three large panels promised some light-hearted fun for adults. The first time the actor playing the twins goes out of sight as the "*Stacked*" Myrna and quickly reappears as Myra, "*Identical to Myrna, except in the chestal area*," we admire her skill. Thereafter, when she ducks out of sight, we anticipate her quick change artistry and applaud the play's technical mastery. Vogel told an interviewer that "scary stuff" lies beneath the surface of *The Mineola Twins*, and the variety of references lumps the truly frightening with the entertaining: The Bomb, Doris Day, Levittown, *My Fair Lady*, the SDS, the '68

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Democratic Conven-tion, Teresa Brewer, J. Edgar Hoover, drugs. In general, though, our focus is drawn too relentlessly to the singular, and the dots don't connect. In some plays, theatrical technique serves as a filter for ideas, for the "scary stuff" that sneaks up on us as we take pleasure in a production's surface. The surface of *The Mineola Twins* is too rich in its details—outlandish costumes, name dropping—and too quick to vary them to earn more than a chuckle of recognition from an audience that sympathizes with Vogel's sensitive point of view.

THIS YEAR'S HUMANA Festival of new American plays reminded me of the pertinent, unfair question that Max Gold asked of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*: "Where are the strikes in the Ford plant?" Pertinent, because Gold could not escape from 1930's problems across Wilder's bridge of love; unfair, because a novel should be judged on its own terms, by its own premises. Doubtless unfair then and maybe impertinent, I left Louisville asking where our problems of race, gender and class went, the very problems that the Actors Theatre has so often tackled head-on. Of the six plays, only *Polaroid Stories* acknowledged a truly messy reality in the world outside its stage boundaries. The author, Naomi Iizuka, turned to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to illuminate the world of "street kids" in contemporary America. A roofed cage occupied much of the stage, but the characters were not confined in it. The cage itself is called "the darkness . . . where the monsters live." After the sound of a jet roaring overhead, the dispossessed young begin the stories of their lives: "My name is Disappear . . . I drink from the river of forgetfulness." Orpheus says, "I'm going to follow you to the afterlife. I'm going to rescue you." Echo tells her sad tale. The mythic original is stripped of its allusive power by pounding sound and insistent obscenities. At the end, the ten characters come together repeating "My name is ———" twenty times or so, filling in the blank with mythic and contemporary ones. The double naming must mean that Ovid's values blend with those of the kids, that his world gives meaning to their mean streets. The actors face out to the audience and wish it "Peace" in a gesture reminiscent of the '60s. This final significance, like the use of the ancient stories, is imposed on the material by the author. The road signs in the text ("This is my kingdom") assume that the audience cannot know Ovid well enough to be moved by suggestive allusions. Seeing the play is like reading Latin from a trot, with crude English translating every other word.

Icarus, by Edwin Sanchez, to Louisville by way of the Public Theatre in New York, drew on the myth of its title to reach a sentimental conclusion about love and death. Altagracia, belligerently unattractive, takes her brother, Primitivo, from the hospital in his wheelchair to occupy a vacant beach house. She encourages him to dream of a career in film; they practice interviews and acceptance speeches, and she forces him to swim.

Enter Beau, wearing a mask, presumably to hide his ugliness. But no, he is truly handsome. He and Altagracia fall in love, and Primitivo sets his sister free by swimming to his death. Like all main stage productions at the Actors Theatre, *Icarus* benefitted from a Paul Owens set, elaborately and lovingly constructed. The most sumptuous of these sets went, fittingly, to *In Her Sight* by Carol Mack. Taking place in Paris and Vienna in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the play unfortunately recalls *Amadeus* in the costume of its dream visitors, its music and its theme of manipulation. Marie Theresa Paradies is blind, an accomplished pianist. After the quacks of the

BRIAN SWANN

Ordinary

"The world is spirit; it can't be worked on"
—*Lao Tzu*

Sleep contains everything, then more, so
when the stars slip out they contain sleep
as sleep them. Everything is filled as if
we'd always lived there, &—from unclouded space,
suddenly, white laundry, a wake
coming back, geese picking up the flyway north,
dropping skin I catch on my tongue
till now heir to mornings of dead light—
then air opens wider to wild swans,
each soul at that height male nor female,
fixing the clock at one sweet point whose focus
is emptiness, whose every wingbeat's a sail
making the land move & agree in an old tongue
spoken fresh; bodiless in bodies of shadow &
countershadow that grows from the sky
down & earth up, substance as spirit,
annunciation as ordinary.

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time fail to restore her sight, her father takes her to Mesmer, whose treatment, based on his theory of animal magnetism, has complicating results. She falls in love with Mesmer and begins to regain her sight, but at the high cost of her virtuoso talent. *In Her Sight* fluctuates between concern for Marie Theresa and for the questions her case raises; the clinical and the personal, and the historical and timely never truly fuse. At the end, the play comes round to its beginning seven years before Mesmer's cure, and we hear her play beautifully once more. Dressed as a performing bear, Mozart—who in fact wrote a concerto for her—descends in a balloon and reveals himself to her. An *ursa ex machina*?

Private Eyes, by Stephen Dietz, delighted the theater insiders at the critics weekend in Louisville. Lisa enters at the start to read for a part. She asks the try-out question: "Is there something you're looking for?" But, after a pause, Matthew says only, "Yes." All the power is his until we get to scene two, set in a restaurant where Lisa, holding the standard part-time job that she denied having, waits on him and reverses the arrangement of the first scene. She is surly, places his order for him and gets sympathetic laughter until Director Adrian enters through the house, and we see that both scenes have been parts of a play in rehearsal. Since nothing substantial is at stake, we don't feel betrayed either at this revelation or the others that Dietz cleverly insinuates throughout the play. I wanted cutting-edge material from the author of *God's Planet* and *Halcyon Days*, and I sometimes felt jerked around by the frequent reversals in *Private Eyes*. Finally, it's his premise, and only true talent dares echo Pirandello as Dietz does, right down to the famous gunshot.

The characters in Richard Dresser's *Gunshy* represent attitudes. The author uses them quite resourcefully as vehicles for what the Renaissance called toothless satire. It's worthwhile, extremely well done and very funny, but those who want biting commentary need to look elsewhere. Evie has the best lines and they were delivered with commanding assurance by Maryann Urbano, a standout among the greatly talented company. She responds to "closure" with "If we could slip into English." Her style mimics the forms of social chat that pass for morality in an amoral world: "This divorce is based on a lie" comes out of a satiric tradition in which changing one word questions the easy formula while retaining its general form. She makes herself the object as well as creator of this kind of confusion: "I'm not going to stay in this relationship alone." Dresser's emphasis shifts to action in the second act; the couple reunites, and despite his low sperm count Evie's pompous lover goes off with a much younger woman, an anti-gun activist who has shot him. *Gunshy* is most satisfying for its verbal wit; the incidents serve as place settings for the style.

The title of *Lighting Up the Two Year Old* neatly conveys the quirky tone of the play's first act. A trainer, Carl, fences verbally with Bud to lure him into electrocuting a two-year-old horse to collect insurance as a way of saving the over-financed farm. Bud, a stable hand, is on the run from gamblers who are pressuring him, so he agrees to "light up" the horse for $2,500. The playwright, Benjie Aerenson, gives Carl, expertly played by Bob Burrus, the meatiest lines as he draws Bud in, plays on his weakness and forces his complicity. At first the owner's son, George, resists the scheme but since his name is on some of the bank notes, he goes along. In Act II, the three men are a long way from the tack room of Act I; Carl is dressed in a flashy flamingo sport jacket, George in a white suit and Bud, who now works for George, in white clothes fitting for a gofer at a boat distributorship. Carl has gone to see George in Miami because he believes rightly that Bud has betrayed him to save his own skin. When the two older men agree that Bud has to take the fall, he reveals that George's father, the invalid patriarch of the farm, wired the horse because Bud couldn't bring himself to do it. The play ends with the three men sitting around in their brazen splendor; the insurance investigator and police may already be at the door. Carl's dry wit gave the play its distinction; like *Gunshy*, its first act held more promise than the second fulfilled.

The Connecticut Repertory Theatre identifies itself as the producing arm of the University of Connecticut's Department of Dramatic Arts. Its cast for Ellen McLaughlin's *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* was made up of acting students who articulated the long speeches of the 1995 play with understated emotion—and clarity—that some professionals could imitate.

Any feminist playwright who uses anachronisms invites comparison to Caryl Churchill, but McLaughlin's method is subdued. Clytemnestra appears in an elegant gown and holds a teacup and saucer; Chrysothemis is dressed like a schoolmarm, and Orestes wears an army overcoat. Long set speeches place great demands on actor and audience alike, and director Gary English made no concessions in staging them. A raked disc with a *Godot*-like tree arching over it occupied center stage; the actors' movements were stately, thoroughly in keeping with the play's serious use of the great myths. McLaughlin writes out of deep respect for her sources even as she rearranges their emphases; she trusts their weighty meanings to supplement her own. Just before she is sacrificed, for example, Iphigenia says simply, "Suddenly I am the last and only girl." The simple expression gives the audience what it needs to make the contemporary application, much as the final tableau does—Orestes at Iphigenia's feet, where she is enshrined forever, telling her "one story over and over again." McLaughlin builds her dramatic structure around that story; she makes it timely without adorning it. □

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NAR
THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

Y (1928-1994)

e Great Wall of China

s and the ball court at Chichen-Itza,
t was interesting while it was going on,
e, slaves, overseers, the living emperor
lie and the dead emperor
ing to us that if you happened to live in the moon
e earth, this is what you see.

he moon and I looked down
acing over the blue ocean
ught were ice putting their feet forth and then retreating,
mally together to celebrate marriage
e recriminations of their divorce.

Great Wall of China and I became fewer.
of the pyramid, and a coral snake
one of the ball court, where the blood had been.

ne of me and I built nothing
omfortable without possessions.
ons, around me on every side and up
een me and the moon, the Sea of Tranquility,
ne moon, is what you see.

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SWIMMING

A Story by Emily Meier

In the frozen winter of his illness, as his cancer spread and he began to die, Edward's pale eyes shone a luminous brown. Stilled in her private weather, Nora looked at herself, at her own eyes puffy with elephant skin. Ridgy. Gray. She pulled at her face, looked to see if her teeth had moved in their bones.

Six years earlier she had married Edward. Quietly. Simply. He was steady—the absorbed face she saw when she looked through the glass windows of her office and realized she was thirty-four: past the optimum window for marriage, past the years of ready, casual relationships. She wanted a home. A husband to touch in sleep. A child.

On their wedding trip to Spain, she had tried not to think whether she was in love, though certainly she thought she could love Edward. She loved easily: she loved her cat, she'd loved teachers, she loved her friends. But in Sevilla, city of a thousand wedding dresses, while Edward walked the winding streets of the Jewish Quarter, guidebook in hand, one eye alerted to dog shit, Nora's mind wandered to daydreams of passionate Moors. When motor scooters rocketed by, she held her ground and Edward pressed his back against buildings. In restaurants he was solicitous, over-solicitous. As formal as the Spanish waiters in their black tuxedos, he chose dishes for her until she put her spoon into the *sopa de castellana* and its raw egg yolk flooded her bowl. She ordered for herself then, and Edward, without comment, withdrew a distance into himself as though something more fragile than the egg had broken. Nora, for the first time, thought she had married selfishly.

There was sex but no child. As careful in lovemaking as he was at his work editing math-crammed economics texts, Edward never failed to make her come. But he had a studiedness to his movements, a certain roteness that made Nora feel she might read along: *For variety, manipulate clitoris with opposite hand while trailing lead hand between breasts. In beginning thrusts, set a slow pace much like a two-beat kick in swimming.* More than a marriage, she had entered a depression, she thought, though she kept the secret, guiltily praising Edward's kindness until it was legendary with her father: "A little stuffy, we thought at first, but he's been real good to our Nora."

And always no child. Never a child. No flutter of hope but the clock-beat regularity of each month's small stain of red death. Eventually, reluctantly, they had consulted doctors. Nora had been tested and prodded, laparascoped and advised she could be optimistic. Edward, on his third visit, was routed abruptly to an

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OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

oncologist. A pancreatic cancer, they were told. Certainly fatal. Probably fast.

When he could no longer talk, Edward caught at her clothes, looked at her with the urgency of speech. Nora brought him his laptop, placed his hands on the keys as though he were an autistic child to uncode.

Nothing. Staring eyes.

She offered him soup. Wrapped him in goosedown comforters and cashmere mufflers that did not scratch. Played the limping Caruso records that had been his father's. Read to him from the *Tales of the Alhambra* which he'd loved from the day she'd bought it in Granada, and which she'd always found stiff and tedious.

"Washington Irving is wrong," she said. "The towers of the Alhambra aren't ruddy at all." She had told Edward this on the Costa del Sol where she'd left the book face down on the sand and watched him swim his even strokes in the cold February sea, said it when he came out of the water to dry off and kissed her readily as though he had gotten used to it. Said it now, though she did not think that he heard her.

In the morning sunlight, she watched him sleep, saw him miss a rattled breath and grow still. She sat quietly, hands in her lap. Thought *what if he's dead, he is dead, is that what it smells like death, his eyelids are cold and that's death.*

She ran. In the kitchen, the fall of her footsteps on cold tile, she listened to see if the water was running. She tore at the drawer, found the phone book, rattled the stunned pages of calling areas and numbers for repairs. She leaned into the wall and dialed "O."

"I think he's dead. My husband." This was her voice. Sound in a bottle. "What should I do? Is there something now I should do?"

A funeral. A cremation. Nora carried light ashes home in a box.

At work she resumed a full schedule, asked that Edward's last project carry his name, selected the type style herself. She dressed carefully. Soft blouses, tailored suits. She brushed her hair sleek and fastened it back in a clip, smoothed her makeup over her cheeks and etched her lips clearly with liner. She kept her in-basket clean, walked with an invisible book on her head.

"Stop doing this," her secretary said. "You're in shock. Scream. Nobody will care if you cry. Everybody would really like it if you did."

On the stairs, her boss stopped her, touched her on the elbow. "Take some time off," he said.

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She moved his hand, answered him. "I already have."

The weather grew milder, but she did not feel the thaw, barely noticed the snow shrink. On Saturday, in jeans and a flannel shirt and Edward's one baggy sweater, she sorted. Methodically, she filled boxes, labeling them, extracting her life from Edward's life, his life from hers. His music and books and the collection of pipes he had never smoked all went into the corner of the living room next to his chair. She pulled his suits out of the closet and found the clothes she had pushed to the back wall. They were hers—dated and too big for her. Pre-Edward clothes. Pre-Size 8. She held a jacket in front of her and looked in the mirror and for a blurred second did not know herself. She dropped the jacket and went into the kitchen. She piled fruit on the counter: white-rotted grapes, apples and oranges, a hard pear. She found a peach and gnawed it down to the pit.

The doorbell rang and she let her father in. "You're not moving," he said tentatively, looking around. "They say to wait a year."

Nora held out an apple. "Maybe I've waited forty years. No, I'm not moving." She pressed the apple into his hand, wouldn't let him talk.

She gave him lunch and sent him home with a carton full of tissues, paper towels, toilet paper. "Edward stockpiled. Not me. Take it," she insisted, suddenly hurried, suddenly panicked.

Her calendar in front of her and leaning on her hands, Nora sat on the hassock by the window. She ran her finger down the Saturdays. Counting the days, it was two weeks since Edward had died: two weeks since his death and almost six weeks since her last period. Nora spread her hand open on the calendar, felt the draggy smoothness of its paper. She knew the likelihood: a hormonal screwup from stress and fatigue. She knew the stranger possibility: a baby.

She leaned on her side against the couch, let the calendar roll over itself and onto the floor. A month ago they had slipped into grayness, into the low-cloudy world of deathwatch. Yet Edward had managed full arousal one last time and she had helped, scared the whole time they would kill him.

"I want this," he'd said. He was feverish to the touch, his breathing uneven, and Nora wondered seriously if the cancer had moved into his brain.

"But what if it hurts?"

"The morphine . . ." Edward closed his eyes and Nora thought he had drifted back into sleep. She had seen this kind of deep tiredness in her grandparents when they were very old, but it still startled her in Edward. She could not separate the sense of it from age. She turned the lamps off, clicked the switches on on the nightlights her father had bought the day after Edward had fallen against the dresser on his way to the bathroom. She picked up the water jug from the nightstand and took it out to the kitchen for more ice.

When she came back, Edward was awake and looking at her, his face a filmy blue in the dim light. "An aquarium," he said.

She looked at him, puzzled, then understood. "I'm blue too? We look like we're in an aquarium? Maybe one of the big ones in Chicago."

He was fumbling at the covers, his fingers scratching against the sheet as he tried to push it down.

"Oh, I don't think so," she said quickly, speaking even before his eyes tightened, a sudden pain riding his body.

When his body relaxed, she unclenched her hands and sat down on the bed. "Are you O.K.?" she said. She was aware of how pointless the question was, but how important. For her. She longed for his words, his explanation of all the ways he was sad at dying and the way he knew he was alive because he could feel pain and the way he wanted to be alive from pleasure even in his jagged, skeletal body.

She touched his cheek. "We can do this if you really want," she said, surprised at her own words, certain, as she said them, that she was right.

She helped him with the sheet. She touched him and stroked him. He wanted her clothes off. Everything but her open, silky blouse that cooled his hands, made her eyes green. She could tell these things. Knew that he wanted the Barber cello concerto on, wanted it turned low so the *fortes* were muted.

She lay on the bed, still stroking him, smelled the papery skin odor that had grown over the quiet scent of him that always lingered on the pillowcases and in his shirts. "What's going to work here?" she said, trying to sound cheerful. "What should I do?"

His eyes were filled with the room's light. He touched her breast and she thought she felt a fingernail, then knew it was the bone of his fingertip. She saw the light in the wisps of his chest hair. She rolled over, moved a leg across him without making contact. She touched his face, kissed him. Her weight was on one elbow and her knees, and she lowered herself so she could feel him just beneath her.

"You all right?" she whispered.

"Keep going," he said. She rubbed against him. He had closed his eyes. She could feel the slow, slow stiffening, the pulse of blood. Finally, with her fingertips she pressed him carefully into her, hoped for a point of weightless contact. Wondered if his dying was this death, too: of sex.

His orgasm, when it came, was a muffled gasp. He shivered his semen into her and then lay flinching with pain. Nora slipped off him and lay quiet, tried helplessly for something to say. The scent in her nostrils was

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■

unmistakable. *Marron.* A seminal odor like the pungent flower of a Spanish chestnut tree.

Edward's hands twitched against the sheets. "Garden of earthly delights," he mumbled.

Nora wanted to cry, wanted to know if death, with its narrowing eye, had taught him bitterness as life never had. And now a baby from this sorrowful lovemaking? She did not want a baby. This baby. This theoretical baby, product of an aging egg and the irradiated sperm of a father who'd not lived to be loved. Or to stick up for himself. She could not imagine this nightmare child.

Nora picked up the calendar, lobbed it into Edward's books. In her study, she ransacked her desk, searched for her French tapes, found them and stood tapping her fingers, frowning at the rush of sounds, the muffled smear and swallow of syllables she couldn't understand. She tried reading the manuscript she'd brought home from work, then opened the piano and practiced the *Goldberg Variations* she'd intended as a gift for Edward but accepted now as a gift to herself. She concentrated on time, studied each measure as a synergy of rhythm and math.

In the night, thunder cracked. She stood at the bedroom window and saw not the pummel of rain but snow sheening from dark silver to white as lightning flashed across it. She touched her nightgown for blood. She found none.

Dreaming and awake, she perceived herself as a container, a full cup to balance to prevent a spill, though she knew she could not allow this child—child?—to grow to full term.

Yet wide awake at 4 a.m., she was wild with hope. She could pretend. She did pretend. She closed her eyes and held her baby: squirming and moist-lipped, perfectly sound, perfectly smart. A smiler. A baby that laughed. She divided up features: Edward's small ears and gray-brown eyes; her mouth, her chin; a perfect nose from the ancestral heap. A bubble-blowing, beautiful baby.

In the morning, rain shooting down the windshield like tracers from a firecracker, she drove to their club. It was Edward's place more than hers. She was a runner, had been since they married and Edward had asked her what she did for an exercise program.

The rain dripping down her face, she hunted in her purse for her membership card while the girl at the desk waited. She went through pockets, through her wallet card-holder.

"Oh, here," she said, remembering the zippered pouch in her duffel bag. She pulled out the card, handed it over, bar-code side up.

The girl read the name, slid the card through the scanner and smiled when she handed it back. "The teachers always point out Mr. Luca's strokes. Such good mechanics. I haven't seen him in awhile." She looked over Nora's shoulder toward the parking lot.

Nora fumbled the card into her purse. "He's not coming. He's been very ill. Actually, he had cancer and he's died."

She picked up her duffel bag, saw the girl's face turn a blotchy red, saw her open and close her mouth, felt the shady power, the pulled trigger of her own knowledge.

"I can tell them to change you." The girl was talking over the music for the aerobics class. "I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Luca. To the reduced rate. They'll give you the lower rate. How awful. His stroke mechanics were really the best."

Nora nodded, shouldered her bag. "I've forgotten my goggles. Later. Thanks. Maybe I'll come back later."

In the car she held onto the steering wheel, blinked the baby into a second of non-existence. She wanted to smile, wanted to tell Edward he'd made a conquest of an eighteen year old with sweet, round glasses, wanted very much to tell him that.

At her office on Monday, she poured her coffee down the water cooler and turned down an offer of drinks after work. She took the exit from the building that skirted the smokers' corridor and got on the interstate. Fifteen miles later, she spotted a drugstore she'd never been to where she could look for a kit for a pregnancy test. With the motor idling in a strip mall lot, she sat in her car and listened to William Maxwell tell a radio interviewer he'd not just written books but had told stories to his wife at night, that if he fell asleep before he finished, she woke him up, pulling him back to consciousness so she could learn what happened.

This was what wives did, Nora thought. They didn't worry a man's conscience, but rather his consciousness. And they brought him back, when necessary, so his voice could grow perilously old. And beautiful. This was what they did.

She shifted into reverse, pulled onto the freeway and drove with the glistening, blued lights of twilight back into the city.

In her neighborhood the streets had disappeared, jack-hammered open since morning. She made detours until she found a route into her own driveway. Inside her living room, she glanced at the boxes, decided once more she'd decide later what to do with them. She ate a banana. She ate a bowl of cereal and got out her swimsuit and did her own pregnancy check: still no blood.

At the club desk there was a new girl, and Nora went to the locker room anonymously. She'd mocked Edward for his swimmer's faith. "Right. The perfect exercise. No heat stress. Low impact. I'll put it on your gravestone," she'd said before he got sick, but here

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she was. She was ready for the exercise that didn't jar anything loose.

She made her way through bodies, all with their signature mark of triangle fuzz. She remembered this familiar thing—that women out of their clothes surprised her. The matter-of-factness of their shapes and movements. The way their bones and muscle and fat molded perfect shapes or big-haunched, saggy ones. The way long thighs and low-curled breasts and a thick pad of stomach could look very sexy. Once, on a morning when she'd come with Edward to use the exercise machines, she'd told him that.

"Your theory is the ones that look like they'd look the best don't?" He had lifted their duffel bags from the back of the car, and he held onto them waiting for her answer—teasing, not letting her off the hook.

"Something like that." She'd laughed a little, half-defensive, half-embarrassed. "It's just there's all this variety—more than fat and thin—and we pretend there's not. Like *Schindler's List.* We're supposed to believe no Jewish women have cellulite? A little flesh maybe looks good. Lived in. I don't know. Disturbing. Like a woman had something to do with making her own body."

"Write an article. Take a camera to all the health clubs and Y's."

"Right," she'd said and said now, half outloud, soaping herself in the shower. She saw the surprised look on the face of the naked woman next to her, wanted to say she was talking to her husband the swimmer who'd died with perfect joints, that this was how she did it.

The pool was almost empty. Nora stretched her arms, her legs, tugged her swim cap on and adjusted her goggles, realized she was nervous. On their trips to Florida or Aruba, she'd paddled a little, floated next to the shore while she watched Edward swim against the waves. But basically, she didn't swim. Basically, water frightened her very much.

She put her feet in the pool, slid carefully down the side until she could stand up. She eased her shoulders under water. O.K. She was doing O.K.

"If you can run, you can swim," Edward always said, and she tried that now. Tried running in the water until she had pushed herself off the bottom and was kicking, kicking, her body tensed, her face in water that pushed in her nose and her ears, scissored her neck, pulled her sideways. She flailed up, exploded air, felt her heart beating. With the shock of chlorine, she inhaled her first real breath in weeks.

In a coffeehouse with tall ceilings and potted palms, Nora was drinking coffee with her friend Liz. She'd ordered decaf.

"Can't sleep?" Liz asked. Her saucer eyes, which were dark like her hair, were full-bore on Nora.

"No. Just decaf. I can sleep. Well not exactly, but it's not that."

"Are you O.K.? Are you doing O.K.? God, Nora, you worry me. You're so contained with all this. You should go ahead and fall apart if you need to. I'll catch. Everybody will. You've got friends."

"You cut your hair."

Liz pulled at an earlobe length curl and turned her head. "Is it fuller? I hate it when it looks stringy. Argh. An attack frond." She ducked, pushed away the fringy palm hand that had swished over her neck when she moved. "Don't try to distract me. I'm not kidding about this. Have you got somebody to talk to? I'd have been crazy without my shrink when Steve and I split."

"Maybe I need more than a shrink."

"What?"

"Maybe I'm pregnant."

Liz blinked, juggled her cup two-handed onto the table. She looked at Nora. "This is possible?"

Nora nodded.

"It does explain the decaf."

"I was thinking maybe it's stress."

"It could be stress. Right. Or hysterical pregnancy. Didn't you always hear about that when you were a kid?" Liz drummed the table, stuck her finger in her coffee. "If it's for real—God, what do you do from here?"

"I don't know. Oh, the crazy part of me keeps seeing this perfect baby that shakes off the radiation and chemo and doesn't mind being fatherless and passes amniocentesis for aging moms with flying colors."

"You're not that old for a mother these days. You'd be almost a baby of a mom in Italy. But you don't really know."

"I don't know a thing. You don't either."

"Right. I can do that. I don't know a thing." Liz was shredding her napkin, pulling at the earlobe curl again.

"Are we ready to go?" Nora reached for her coat.

Liz looked at the clock. "Sure. Right. I can catch a bus in three minutes." She stuck her napkin in her coffee mug and slid her own coat off the chair.

Outside, Nora pulled her gloves on, pushed the fabric into the webs of her fingers. The weather was chilly, uncertain, lodged in the fault line between winter and spring.

"I miss Edward," Liz said. "You had the perfect man. Smart and cultured. Fit. Devoted. One in a million. Clean."

"Clean?"

"Is that like saying somebody's earnest? He just always struck me as clean. It was a comfortable clean. You know, clean."

"And you know I love you even though you're nuts." Nora felt the wind whip up, roll down from the height

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of the buildings. A neon sign had blinked Liz's face blue, and Nora reached over and grasped her hand. "I've been scared. That I'm not me any more. That I'm this Nora St. Clair Luca person who turned into the other bookend to Edward. And the most awful part is for the last six years of Edward's life what he had was me wanting something else. Excitement. Babies. I don't even know what all. I cheated him."

"Never." Liz looked at her, hugged her. "Loony girl. He was crazy in love with you. That was the cleanness. A sort of transparency of love. But you've got the bookend thing. You were in sync. A real out of body experience for me watching that."

"Here's your bus."

"Get one of those kits. Let me know. I'll call you if you don't call me. Are you going home?"

Nora shook her head, reaffirming her own decision. "Swimming," she said. She buttoned her collar, stepped back from the curb and the air hiss of the bus's brakes, opened and closed her hand goodby.

At the pool, she was ready for the water. Before work, she'd sat at the kitchen table reading one of Edward's swimming books. Brushing toast crumbs from the pages, she'd memorized a list of basic skills. Now, with a picture in her mind of Johnny Weissmuller in a loin cloth, she felt purposeful. She adjusted her goggles, snugged them under her eyes. "Learning to swim, baby," she whispered.

Releasing the side of the pool, she dunked herself. She tried a bob. Another bob. She exhaled and inhaled until she'd pockmarked the water with gurgles of air, and then bobbed some more. She kept jumping and bobbing, counting and bobbing, water swishing down her shoulders as she emerged, water enveloping her when she z-ed her body back below the surface. Then she pushed herself over, jellyfished, felt the water buoy and hold her as her arms hung down, felt it move beneath her like the swift, sudden curve of a manatee.

Her father was waiting on the front steps when she got home. "You don't have your key?" she asked.

"I didn't want to scare you. Somebody inside when you got here. It's not that cold out." He was shivering a little, small in his jacket.

Nora opened the door. "That's me." Her father pointed at the blinking answering machine light. "I called before I came over. Your mother told me I should."

Nora nodded, then kissed him swiftly and hung up his jacket. "Got a new picture?" she said. He was unrolling a pebbley sheet of drawing paper.

"I did it off the wedding photograph of you and Edward. I thought you needed a real picture of him."

Nora looked at the sketch her father was holding. It was smudgy with charcoal, innocently drawn in her father's self-taught style. But it had something of Edward. His own innocence perhaps. His near-youth. His health.

"You made him very handsome," she said, looking at the fine features, the intelligent eyes.

"He was a handsome man."

"You think so?" She looked at her father and back at the picture. "I was never quite sure."

"The smartest person I ever knew and very handsome. The sickness wasted him." Her father cleared his throat. "I figured you'd want the picture of the man you fell in love with. So you remember things right, after all this sorrow."

Nora felt the drawing paper rolling back against her hand, creasing itself against her fingernails. Her hair was still wet against her neck, clingy like a newborn's. She let the picture curl itself shut. "I'm learning how to swim," she said.

When her father left, she clicked the television on and off and sat in Edward's chair and read about body roll, about Bernoulli's Theorem and laminar flow, about the principles of lift and drag in the water. She wanted a name for how the water carried her, and that was an Edward thing to want, but she wanted it anyway. She hunted for his Barber CD's, and put on the first movement of the cello concerto, saw herself swimming, moving in the snaking currents of its sound, holding to its steady tempo despite the syncopation, the rhythmic edge.

She fed herself a tangerine, made a bowl of cream of wheat and ate a cold spear of broccoli. She went to bed.

No blood.

The night compressed itself around her. Nora pushed her cupped hand through its space. Edward hadn't made stories for her, but he had read to her, had floated her into the surface of sleep. Her mind was full of partial tales, theories: she knew that the perception of reality changes with the amount of information possessed, but she didn't know who had said so or the proof offered. She knew a shampoo of urine was the aphrodisiac of somebody's culture, but not whose. She knew there was a case for the slugging average as a measurement in baseball, but she wasn't clear what it was. She knew that Liberace, J. Edgar Hoover, and Barney Frank had all had chauffeurs, but she didn't know to what extent. And she knew all these things in Edward's voice, but she could not find it now to make her sleep. There were shadows on her ceiling, a starchy newness to her sheets. She was wide awake.

She squinted at the dial on her alarm clock, waited for the minute to switch and then held her pulse until it switched again. Seventy-two. She'd lifted her head, so she should start again, though what did it matter? Edward, before he was ill, Edward unsedated and fac-

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ing oral surgery was a fifty-two in a dentist's chair. He had a pulse like Pele's, a pulse that you waited for like waiting for the other shoe to drop, and yet before he died, he was in the 90's, his body burning itself up.

Nora hunched herself into her pillow. If she slept, *when* she slept, she would dream a new baby. This had started to happen.

On Thursday, Liz called her at work during a morning production meeting. Nora took the phone, cradled it while she fanned out color samples. "Not these. Green for a book on pulmonary disease?"

"It fits. The whole green thing," Liz said in her ear.

"This is a bad time."

"O.K., but did you get the kit? I left two messages on your machine."

Nora shook off more colors. "I'll call you later."

"Can you meet me for lunch? 12:30?"

"Probably. You can check with my secretary." Nora pushed an extension button and handed the phone off to the art director. "This is about breathing. We want the color of water and air. Understand? You do understand? We need blue," she said.

She left the room. She shut the door hard and leaned against it, her body tense, reaching for the motion of the butterfly stroke she'd read about at breakfast. She could almost feel it in her nerves: the pulse of the wave through her body, the tuck of her chin as her head forced the surface and down.

At lunch, Liz was curious. "What's with this swimming thing? I thought you hated swimming."

"No, I'm just afraid of the water." Nora spooned an ice cube out of her glass. "And I'm too old to be afraid of things."

"Then this won't scare you." Liz reached down on the bench and set a paper bag on the table. "I got you a kit. You can find out now instead of driving yourself crazy."

"I should take this as a friendly gesture?" Nora paused. "Maybe I'll be crazier if I find out."

"You'll know what you're dealing with so you can make a decision. No baby and, if you really want it, maybe you can have one anyway. All you need is a doctor to have sperm shipped to. Some of the stuff is from really smart guys. Or good looking if you'd rather. You can even do it yourself. Well, maybe some ovulation shots."

"And you are certifiably crazy. This is something you've tried?"

"No. You're older than I am. Don't shake your head. You are. Six months. I haven't panicked yet. And, anyway, I'm not sure I've got this baby thing you do. What if the kid got my hair? But there's this other business. You have to go through these stages and I don't think you're doing so well. The grief thing. I've got a book at home. You have to do all of them—denial and apathy. Anger. Resolution. Maybe there're more, but that's what I remember. You're like somewhere between weird guilt and smooth sailing. I think that's a problem."

"Maybe I'm ahead of schedule."

"I don't see that."

"Well I know Edward is dead and I'm not inert and I'm not angry at him that he's dead. It's more like I'm angry he was ever alive. You have that on your list?"

"That could be anger."

"Right. Here's this perfectly admirable man who was forty before he ever really learned irony, and for six years I'm his wife and I'm not single any more—not really. I'm this altered thing, except older."

"Maybe this is like opera."

"Explain?"

"The thing Shaw said. That an opera's just a tenor and soprano wanting to make love, but they get stopped by the baritone. Wait, Nora. I've got this figured out. Edward is the tenor and you're the soprano, but this *idea* of something got in the way of your understanding you really were in love. And that's the baritone."

"Edward was a baritone."

"We're talking metaphor. Anyway, Nora, he did learn irony. Doesn't that count?"

"Maybe," Nora told herself, but it was later, when she was driving to the pool after work. She'd gotten new goggles that fit better and made her look like a Martian. Two little black girls, smooth and dry as a stone, pointed at her and whispered while they wriggled their suits on.

In the water, Nora stood with a kickboard and measured the pool length with her eyes. She knew she had the start of a decent kick. When she'd held the pool side and stroked her legs against the water, she'd felt a current move across her soles and insteps. She settled her goggles now, slicked the strap ends backwards away from her eyes. She gripped the board and pushed off the wall, started the slap of her feet through the surface, aimed herself down the pool toward deep water.

She gulped, spit out water, locked on harder to the kickboard, felt the hard give of the styrofoam. Stale water had caught her mouth—water like the foot smell of the locker room corridor. She could feel the tension in her thighs, the slow going, her breath high and choky in her lungs, but she wasn't going to stop, wouldn't stop, wouldn't. She was past the guard stand. Halfway. Past halfway. The stripe on the pool floor bent, dipped down, and there was more water to kick against, and she didn't know where her chin should be. But she was moving, the blue kickboard riding ahead of her. She could see the string of colored pennants coming at her, and she kicked harder, but it slowed her down. The isosceles colors went stationary, stayed hanging out of reach. And then she was moving after

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all, a snail's kick until at last the pennants were over her, past her and she stretched out, stretched until the board nudged the pool wall, and she could grab on and fumble the board into the gutter, the trough, the thing it was that carried the water's spill and splash at this hard perimeter.

"Mrs. Luca." Nora heard the voice above her.

"Did you want some help?" It was the girl from the desk, the first girl, leaning over with her hands on her knees. She had on a suit and a tank top that said LIFE-GUARD.

"I'm O.K."

"I mean with your kick. If you relax your ankles. Turn your toes in a little and bend your knees on the downbeat. It's kick a ball, kick a ball, keep your foot loose, and follow through. But loosen your ankles. That's the main part. It's using your muscles but not pumped."

Nora nodded. "Thanks," she said, but she waited at the wall until the girl had moved away, waited until the girl had whistled the children from the locker room to walk not run, waited until she was starting over with her heartbeat.

Kick a ball, kick a ball. She grasped the kickboard and let go of the pool edge. She was pushing through panic, and then she caught herself, let her feet go floppy. First her right foot. Then her left. The hiccoughy Barber *pizzicato* was playing in her brain and she was going faster. Going almost fast.

At mid-pool, safe in the shallow water, she popped the board free and tried one whirl of her arms, her shoulders powering up and out and her tucked chin pulling her face below the surface. When she came up for air, she wanted to shout and the shout stayed bursting inside her until she walked past the TV in the lobby and heard that Greg Louganis—water man, power and grace man—had AIDS, was possibly sick, was probably dying.

In the darkness, the streets still gone, she drove the parallel universe of alleyways, skinnying her car by the backsides of buildings, the canted views, the sets of BMW's and Toyotas parked next to each other on cement slabs. When she'd found a parking spot, she carried her duffel bag up to her door and turned the key. There was a message from Liz on the answering machine, and Nora knew she wouldn't call her back, wouldn't tell her she'd left the pregnancy kit locked in her trunk on purpose, that in this matter of discovery, she'd settled on the same *laissez-faire* approach she'd adopted for the boxes in her living room.

She'd showered at the pool, but she started a bath anyway, wrapped herself in a terry robe and waited for the tub to fill. At Christmas, Edward had given her bath beads in a high-necked bottle with a gold-leaf label and satin tie. Translucent. Peach. She knew when he'd bought them. On Christmas Eve, he'd gone out alone, determined, happy, she thought, though he came home exhausted and shivering and she'd pulled him out of his coat and scarf, the hat and gloves, clothes. Piled blankets and hot water bottles on him until his trembling had almost stopped.

"Don't look in my jacket pocket," he'd said, catching her hand, pulling himself back from sleep, and she'd nodded her promise.

She reached for the bottle now, taking it from the shelf above the bath. Untying the ribbon, she held the open neck to her nose. Sandalwood maybe, talcum, a hint of tangerine, a penetrating and exotic scent of sensual perfume that Edward with his blasted senses could hardly have smelled.

She pried out the first bead, a second, and dropped them under the streaming water, watched them ride their own foam. Even before she stepped into the water she could smell the scent on her skin.

She soaked in the water, rubbed at her toes. Carefully, she worked the loofah sponge over her body, examined her fingernails and pushed the cuticles back. She brushed her hair from her forehead and ran the hot water, watched the bubbles pop and disappear. The scent clung, powdery, layered: even her thoughts bore its code. A genie scent. Odor from a bottle that had slipped through time and, because her breathing was no longer tight or resistant, gave her Edward. His presence. His desire. A hint of all the things he knew, which she'd boxed up, banished, she'd thought, to the living room.

The phone rang, stopped after two rings when the answering machine intercepted it. Another message from Liz. Or maybe a discreet hangup from her mother who bore her worries quietly, who offered help but who suggested with her familiar body language that there really wasn't any.

Nora pushed the handle to let the water out. She stepped onto the bath mat. No blood. She dried the wet ends of her hair with a towel, tried rubbing the scent from her skin, kept rubbing, realized even as her eyes stung that the scent wouldn't go away, wouldn't. She put on her nightgown and crawled into bed. For a still moment, Edward was there. In the perfumed air, she could feel the rocking motion of his voice.

When she slept, she dreamed a dream of many infants, a tawny one like a black man she'd faced in the split time of a revolving door—something private and spare, inexplicable and alluring in his manner. Another baby that was twins, each infant-motion telegraphed in duplicate. A baby with a dental bridge of smiling white teeth, and one that came with a pedigree of Nobel Laureates, one fathered through a wet suit by a deep sea demolitions expert. A last one did perfect flip turns inside its amniotic sac.

Exhausted mother that she was, she turned to

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Edward for help. And this was what surprised her: in spite of howling infants, the man she observed commanded her full schoolgirl attention (she, a teenage mother with round glasses). He was motion-picture large. She took the slow, camera's eye tour of each feature, each muscle group until the lens reversed and Edward was looking at her with such fearless scrutiny she could not look back but opened the eyes of her dream and knew she had dreamed a true thing: Edward a year ago in a cold Prague bar, more brown eyed than gray in his suede jacket, preoccupied until the instant she looked at him and he looked back, and she startled with love. A familiar thing. A true thing. A thing as true as the scent on her skin, and she had forgotten it.

In the morning her father surprised her, walking up the steps out of a blue sky when she went outside to get the paper. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"You didn't answer your messages. Your mother was worried."

Nora picked up the newspaper and held the door for him to follow her inside. "So, what were my messages?"

"Just about how are you."

Her father stopped in the living room and in the middle of Liz talking on the answering machine: *. . . and it says, too, you should speak to someone about sex. Use it or lose it. Call me, O.K.?*

"You need to pick that up?" her father asked, and Nora shook her head and then laughed. "You have time for tea before I leave for work?"

"I got time yes. But maybe no. Nora, your mother and I were talking about this. If you're grieving over two deaths, Edward, and you know, family plans, your mother and I want to be all the family we can."

"I know. I do know," she said, thinking maybe, just maybe he was getting close.

At work she left a flower and a note for the art director saying aqua was a good compromise, he was right to keep that much green. She worked through lunch, eating a sandwich at her desk. At four-thirty she was out the door, headed toward the pool. She'd studied the schedule and there was an hour between Masters' Swim and a water aerobics class. In fact, she had the pool to herself except for the lifeguard.

"Excuse me," Nora said. She'd recognized the Edward fan, though she looked different with a new spiky haircut and no glasses. "I don't know your name. Would you mind watching my stroke and telling me what I'm doing worst?"

"Tree, but T-r-i," the girl said, pulling her chair closer to the pool edge. "Short for Triumph. I've got five older brothers. Sure, I'll watch."

"Tri," Nora said. She started out, started running into her kick, started streamlining her body, the way she'd read to do in the swimming book, and then reaching her arms crablike into the water. She swam with her face down.

When she came up for air and turned around, Tri was standing on the pool deck. "Not bad. Relax, though. You're tight and you need to lift your left arm out of the water more. Your kick is better. Can you follow your arm back with your head and catch a breath? It's all in one motion. Watch." She pulled her tank top off and made an easy, shallow dive into the pool. Nora saw the Edward smoothness of her stroke, the easy rhythm as she swam half the pool and back to her.

"See the air pocket at my shoulder? Face the wall first. Just your breathing and arms. Blow all your air out underwater."

Nora tried planting her feet while she pulled her arms through the water and rotated her head to the side and back. She felt like a ventriloquist's dummy, but she was catching the breath. She was getting it.

"Great," Tri said. "Now try it with the kick."

Nora nodded. She resettled her goggles. Counted to three. Pushed off the wall. She was kicking too hard, her dead-in-the-water kick was back, but the arm pull felt close and she was getting air. She was probably swimming. Twelve strokes down the pool, she thought *deep water ahead* and swallowed a mouthful and came up sputtering.

Tri laughed. "You were doing it. But you're tense. Are you scared?"

"Of the deep end."

"Try just hanging in the water like you're lying over a table."

"The jellyfish?"

"Right. Do it and relax every muscle you've got."

Inhaling, Nora tried to remember the water moving to hold her as she hung below the surface, thought of the manatee. "Relax," she heard in her ear, and then she felt the tight grasp of her wrist and her body rolling over, her face up, and she was being drawn through the water, flying as though she were pulled by a harness of dolphins.

"Unbelievable," she said when Tri transferred her hand to the pool wall.

"You can let go," Tri said. "Be an arrow and drop."

"You sure?"

"Hands at your side. I'm here."

Nora thought about that and let go. She was underwater, the whole five feet six of her, and for the first time in her memory with nothing solid to touch, nothing, and she was frightened, but not really panicked. She looked at the blue walls, blew her breath out and then kicked herself up. She was a body's length from the pool end, and she swam to it.

"See? The water holds you. And you've got the

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lungs. Uh-oh. Kid alert. Back to work." Tri was off down the pool in a flash of heels.

"And maybe I'm dreaming this," Nora said aloud to herself. She leaned back in the water, stared at the ceiling lights, traced their curved rims with her eyes. She rolled over and in the deep water tried a surface dive, not quite afraid but curious at the slight sensation of pressure in her lungs. She practiced her strokes off the wall, her half strokes, and maybe the start of a whip kick. Marveled that she'd never before craved this rhythmic suspension. Made a perfect somersault and came up with water in her nose but didn't care. Swam three solid strokes out, three strokes back, three out, three back. Hung with her shoulders pressed against the side of the pool, her legs in front of her. Saw the gluey balloon of blood on the water: tiny blown filament of blood, impossible parachute. Thought *this is death, is this death, is this death too*?

She swam. Her arms thrashed, flailed. She sucked in water instead of air. She'd lost the sense of how her legs should work. Yet she was not drowning, and knew that she was not. The sway of the water lifted her up, forcing her afloat and into Edward's words from an old beach in their life, that you didn't wrestle Poseidon but ignored him and he went away.

She chopped her way down the water, her goggles steamy, fogged. Had she swum a body out of her body? Had she bridged a span of primordial liquids? And if this choking well of tears and the hollowness tunneling through her were grief at last—the unhealing of what was messily healed—had Edward, Edward for whom she grieved, left a medium to hold her?

In the locker room, she spent twenty-five cents for a tampon, and closed herself inside a changing booth. She sat on the bench in her suit, held her shoulders. Wondered that wracking sobs, a sea of crying, could be so quiet. She dragged her duffel bag between her feet, leaned against the partition, felt its cold metal against her cheek.

A lone black foot, perfect and miniature, appeared beneath the curtain. She looked. A second foot followed, snagged in a pink and yellow swim suit. Nora sensed a topple even before the curtain gave and a small bottom grazed her legs. She heard the startled *oh*, felt the warm body against her. A red barrette like a shiny jawbreaker bobbed upright on a black braid.

Nora heard the squirmy breaths. "My sister won't. Can you get me into my suit?" The child was intent, righting herself, her face squeezed tight as she kept on tugging.

"I'll try." Nora nodded. "Yes, of course," she answered, surprised into calm, into usefulness. She untwisted straps, smoothed the suit across the round stomach, held the loops for arms. She settled them firmly, snugly, the quiet snap on soft shoulder bones. □

ANN KENISTON

Booze

But I must venerate it too,
how it takes so many forms
like a god, who makes his body
impermanent so as to take
pleasure more easily, as Zeus
became lithe, almost feminine,
to tempt and then coerce
the maiden who he knew
beforehand swooned
at the touch of feathers
giving way to swansdown,
and after he had had her,
he invented another bodily disguise.
I've seen it wait, half visible,
sometimes for months, for years,
until every alternative has failed.
In this, as everything it touches,
its intelligence is unblemished by
deceit, since the transparent
glassful, like a glass of water,
elixir of life, or an empty glass
is incapable of distortion but merely
forces the acknowledgment
of what has till then
been unarticulated. And how delicately
it alternates compassion
with ferocity, never collapsing
the way a daughter might
but inspiring, like an accomplished lover,
however brutal, a kind of awe.
And how reverently it touches
the foulest places, and lodges itself
there, progressing so slowly
she scarcely notices she's lost
first appetite, then thirst
for water, that she's become
accident-prone, and her emotional
repertoire has been so radically
diminished that when at last she sees
she is entirely obligated
to what it's made of her, she feels
a helpless gratitude.

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How the Nurse Feels

A Story by Greg Changnon

I play the Nurse but she's a mystery to me. The week before the show opens, we rehearse in full dress and even the costume—this burlap nun get-up with hood and collar—doesn't help me. Juliet is easy; ruled by her parents but led by her heart. But the Nurse is a different story. She's really a nanny but Juliet's fourteen, only a year younger than me, so they can't call her that anymore. So they call her the Nurse. I wonder why she cares that much about the Capulets. The Nurse is a paid employee; why get so involved? I ask our drama coach this question and Mr. Swick says to me with a squinty, exaggerated theater stare, "Think motivation." I don't want to tell him that this isn't helping. Mr. Swick holds his glasses in his fist and waves them at me like some kind of magic wand. "Dig deep, Tess," he says, "Look at everything." That doesn't help either.

As the Nurse, I have eighty-eight lines, appear in eleven of twenty-four scenes and unfortunately, I have no costume changes. From what I know, most of Shakespeare's women don't. The Nurse has sixty-three lines less than Clytemnestra but that's O.K. because on any given day, I'd trade sixty-three lines (no monologues, though) not to have to wear a bed sheet pinned together under my armpit. Or those beach sandals spray-painted brown. After a few rehearsals as the Nurse, I was even glad to be out of the skin of Linda Loman, who I played in the fall show. She had a ton of lines but most of them were just simple questions trying to get her dead-beat husband to open up. After Mrs. Loman, I know what hell it is to be a housewife.

It's Tuesday, the day of our final dress rehearsal, but it's been snowing for three days and this morning they canceled school for the rest of the week. On Thursday night, we're set to open. January in Winnetka is supposed to be snowy but not like this, not with eight-foot drifts and flying clumps of ice and winds that freeze the wetness inside your nose. This is completely arctic. Because of no school, Mr. Swick has set up a phone tree so the cast can keep on top of weather information. Trudy Painter, who's a dismal Juliet, is assigned to call in the morning to tell me if Mr. Swick has found a way for us to rehearse and I turn around and call Tiger De Soto, who I barely know.

When I tell him we won't rehearse today unless the snowplows get out, Tiger waits for a long couple of seconds and says, "That's rough." I imagine I can feel his breath in my ear, coming through the phone.

"So, anyway—," I say, not knowing how to end the thought.

He finishes it for me. "I should keep going over my scene, right?"

"Yeah, you don't want to forget your lines."

Tiger is the Apothecary. He's only in one scene at the end of the play, which is all he could probably manage. I hear he's stoned most of the school day and the only reason he's in Drama Club is that it's a condition of his school probation. The principal must think he'll shape up in a straighter crowd. During most rehearsals Tiger just sits in the back of the theater and holds his guitar, rubbing a finger up and down the glassy strings. Last week, during wardrobe fittings, he saw me in my costume, all that brown fabric hiding what I don't like people to see, and he said to me, "That's sinful." I gave him the glare I'm famous for but all he did was stand there looking at me like no other high school guy. Then his mouth turned up into a strange, lazy smile that made me feel like I didn't need to hide anything. "I can't even see you," he said and I got a twist in my stomach that has yet to work itself out.

Over the phone, I can hear Tiger playing his guitar. I picture him in his bedroom and I don't want to hang up. I say, "You must hate having to do this."

"Hate doing what?"

"Being forced into theater."

"I wasn't forced. This is the third time I tried out. First two I got dinged."

"But what about the—"

Tiger laughs. "Would've liked a better part, though." Over the phone, I imagine him smiling, his lips opening, that one yellow tooth of his peeking through. There's four miles of hard-packed snow between us but I've never felt so close. I can see him pulling at the guitar strings while he squeezes the phone between his chin and shoulder. He lets his little garden of whiskers grow wild and I hear them scratching the receiver. I'm almost sure he doesn't comb his hair at home, that white hair of his without a single strand of brown. He keeps his bedroom dark, filled up with the warm odor of his sweat. He hangs a bandanna over the only lamp. My ear on the phone feels hot now. It's almost better that I've never been inside that bedroom.

"You wanna go over your lines?" I ask, winding the curly phone cord tight around my thumb. The finger is red and puffy but I can't let it go. It feels too right.

"My lines? Which ones?"

"Any of 'em, I guess."

"All right. I'm not looking, O.K.? Here goes. 'Who calls so loud?' That's the first line."

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"Sounds like you got it." One line down, three to go. This phone call's going fast.

"The next line is this: 'Such mortal drugs I have. But—'"

"I bet you won't be forgetting that line," I say and chuckle but Tiger doesn't say a word. I can hear the crackle of silence over the line.

"Whatever," he says.

"Well, you know, considering the—"

"The what?"

"The, I don't know, whatever." The guitar on Tiger's side goes crazy. One chord after another. I listen and wonder who else in all this snow is sitting on the phone listening to a guy play music. I hope I'm the only one. I can feel the conversation ending so I ask, "Hey, where'd you get the name Tiger?"

"When I was a baby—"

"Yeah?"

"I screamed a lot." Then he mumbles something and hangs up. The four miles of snow between us fill up again. He must think I've inched over the thin line between complete indifference and horrible obsession. He had to end the call. I hope there's some kind of news tomorrow and I can take advantage of Mr. Swick's phone tree.

But there is no news. By Wednesday, the snow lightens up. School may open on Monday. Until then, we can't rehearse. Instead of suffering alone, me and Kimberly Pope lie around my basement going through theater withdrawal. We listen to Kimberly's homemade Edith Piaf tape, La Vie en Rose recorded back-to-back on both sides. I adore Kimberly. She has the right mixture of bitchiness and homeliness to sell Lady Capulet. Together, we wonder when we'll ever get back on stage.

Kimberly has brought her clove cigarettes but we can't smoke because my dad is already back from plowing the snow out of the church parking lot. I asked him if we could put on the play there, right on the altar of Saint Gregory's, but he wanted to read the play first and I took that as a bad sign. Ever since I played Big Momma in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, he's been a bit suspicious of high school drama. Instead of running lines, we just lie on the basement floor, sniffing the unlit clove tobacco, commiserating with the Sparrow.

Kimberly stands, hugging the cement pole in the middle of my basement. "Do you think Trudy Painter dyes her hair? Last year, when she was Maggie in Tin Roof, I swear it was redder."

"That bitch," I say, groaning. This groan feels good. It's drawn-out and takes all my breath. I can use it sometime, maybe in Act IV of R & J.

Edith sings and I let her voice surround my body. That voice is about a million years old. It sounds like it's seen it all. If it was up to me, I wouldn't have called her the Sparrow.

"Remember last year?" Kimberly says and then I smile, dreaming of the time we were co-captains of the speech team and told Trudy Painter she wasn't good enough for the squad. In the category of Dramatic Monologue, I was district champion. I went to State but didn't make the finals. I did Martha's speech from Act III of *Virginia Woolf*, the one where Martha breaks down and lets it slip that her son is only a twisted fantasy. Well, she doesn't quite admit it—she's loon crazy, her marriage hanging on by one drunken thread—but it's a great speech and I really tore it up. The rules said no costumes but before my turn in front of those three frowning judges, I used the ladies room to tease out my hair into mid-stage Liz Taylor and got into my mother's old cardigan sweater with the cigarette burn over the heart. Those state judges never cracked a smile. They scowled and made notes on their clipboards, giving me a 10, I know, in articulation. I never got below a 10 in articulation. I saw the score sheets. It was in emotional verity that they screwed me. One judge at State wrote in the comments box that I seemed to be too rehearsed, my emotions planned rather than felt. Right, like a sophomore girl from the suburbs of Chicago has ever felt what Martha feels. Like a high school student can ever have the hell-on-earth experience that Martha has. High school is dull, the judges know that. What do they want me to play, that skinny little virgin Emily from Grover's Corners?

Just after Edith finishes another round of *La Vie*, my dad comes down in his church shoes, Hush Puppies that squeak when he walks up to the lectern, and orders me to turn down the music. Mother has a migraine—the window of the fabric store she owns has blown out in the snow storm and ruined her Christmas sell-back stock.

Dad stands near the bottom of the basement steps waiting for us to talk back. He's a scared man but of what I'm never sure. "Did you hear about Richard De Soto?" he asks.

"Tiger?" I move closer to the stairway.

Dad backs up a step. "His parents came by to see me today. He's disappeared."

"Cool," Kimberly whispers from behind me.

One side of Dad's mouth, the left side, quivers and pulls itself back. This tic is usually saved for the two days surrounding the church's monthly budget meeting. Edith trails off and the music stops. All that comes out of the speakers is the buzz of blank tape running across the tape heads.

"Did he run away?" Kimberly asks, and I think that no, he didn't run away. To run away sounds so pre-teen. He didn't run away. He got the hell out of here.

"Richard's parents told me he was in the play. Do either of you know anything about this?" My dad takes another step back, preparing himself for the worst.

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Kimberly pushes in on her closed eyes with her fingers. A thinking-hard gesture. "He was depressed. I don't know, Reverend Powell, maybe he didn't want to graduate." She's too far away for me to elbow.

My dad has one hand in a fist. The tiny end of a silver cross sticks out between his thumb and index finger. "His parents think something went wrong at school."

"Life," Kimberly says. "Life's gone wrong."

"Keep it to the stage, Miss Pope." My dad stares at us, looking like he's trying to see some sort of terrifying truth we're hiding inside. But he doesn't get it.

The truth is, if Tiger De Soto had the guts to sell marijuana at school then he had enough guts to take off and start over. I try to imagine a life where there is no high school. Both my parents think that after college I'll come back and take over Mother's fabric store but they have no idea. If I could leave now, if I could forget about those dusty linoleum halls, those shoe box dioramas of the Pilgrims that line the walls of Mrs. Seeger's American History class, I would do it in a flash, just like Tiger De Soto. I want to live in New York City, in a basement apartment in the Village. I want to worry about rent and the smelly man that sits at my doorstep. I want to have three lovers at three different theater spaces, one suicidal and the other two Caribbean. Instead, I have to sleep in a pink satin bedroom designed by my mother and, during supper, give feedback on my father's sermons which have titles like: Is Family Love Passé?, The Power of 'I Respect You,' or Jesus says 'Come Every Sunday.' I imagine one Sunday I will hop up to the lectern and do Martha in front of everyone. Dad will read George's lines: "Martha, you drunken sot. You've ruined my lousy life." We'll do the "Fuck the Hostess" scene. That would give the congregation something to sing about.

"What do you know, Tess?" My dad scowls, catching me gazing into my dreams. "You seem like you're hiding something."

I shake my head. I know that I've called Tiger once in my entire life and that I could recite the conversation word for word.

"Tess, if you do— "

"I don't, O.K.?" Tiger screamed when he was a baby. Maybe he wanted to make a break for it even way back then.

"The De Sotos have called the police," my dad says, testing our reactions. I wonder if and when the cops will think about checking phone records. "If you could have been in my office and seen them, Richard's parents, you would know how worried they are. With the snowstorm and the temperature and the roads and all the rest of it."

"Dad, listen, just say a prayer or something."

"Tess," he says, eyes narrowing.

"I don't know where he is."

My dad climbs up to the top of the stairs, murmuring to himself. I've noticed church people can vanish inside themselves faster than the rest of us. At the top of the stairs, my dad, still talking to himself, flicks off the lights and Kimberly and me are left standing in the dark.

Because there isn't any school for the rest of the week, Mr. Swick drives around with snow chains, visiting the cast. He has a kid in Florida and lives in a studio in Buffalo Grove, so he's the kind of person who'd rather be at work. He comes over on Thursday afternoon and we run lines at my kitchen table. He has temporarily postponed the play one week and wants to keep us fresh. My mother stands in the kitchen nearby and looks at Mr. Swick like he's a lunatic, risking his life crisscrossing the icy town just to read Shakespeare with his students. I want to ask him if he knows anything about Tiger but I'm afraid he and my mother will fly to conclusions.

"So, Mr. Swick, when are you gonna do Cats?"

"Mother, please."

"What? I love Cats. At least it's something that won't remind me every performance that fourteen year olds have sex."

"I'm the Nurse, mother. I wear a habit. And cats have sex, too."

My mother tosses her hand in the air and leans against the kitchen island to watch me perform.

"Let's take Act IV, Scene V," Mr. Swick suggests, one hand around a coffee cup that says SHELLEY'S FABRIC FIESTA. "From the top, right when the Nurse discovers Juliet knocked out from the Friar's potion."

I close my eyes and go through the blocking in my head. "O woe!" I recite, "O woeful, woeful, woeful day! Most lamentable day, most woeful day that I ever did behold." But my heart isn't in it. This is my mother's country kitchen and a gingerbread house left over from Christmas still sits in the center of the table. This is miles away from anything crucial.

"What's wrong?" Mr. Swick asks. "You need a line cue?"

"Sorry. I'm just wondering how to feel in this scene."

Mr. Swick closes his script, takes his glasses off and points them at me. His motivation pose again.

"Let's talk about motivation," he says. "What does Shakespeare tell us about the Nurse?"

"Nothing."

"Think, Tess."

"What?"

"Well, how does she feel about Juliet?"

"She loves her like her own?"

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"I like that," my mother says, barging her way back into my life.

"And why does she love her so much?" Mr. Swick asks.

"Does it say in the script?"

"No. This is where you help Shakespeare. Tell me, what does Juliet mean to the Nurse?"

"I can't think," I say, shutting my eyes, trying to dream the woman up. "We know she had a daughter once. A girl named Susan that died. And that girl was exactly Juliet's age."

"Keep going, Tess."

"And so maybe now, whenever she sees Juliet, she thinks of Susan. Everything she felt for one, she now feels for the other. Sometimes, when love shakes up her mind, she really believes that Juliet is Susan."

"That's wonderful," my mother says and takes a loud sip of her tea. What does she know? She's never even read Shakespeare. She couldn't tell a quatrain from a dirty limerick.

"Remember that." Mr. Swick puts his glasses back on and goes to his script. "Remember how it feels to love Juliet so intensely, so much more than anybody knows you do."

I sit for a dramatic pause, trying to get into this.

"Madeleine?" my mother asks, holding out her tray of fancy cookies.

I push away my script. "There isn't gonna be any play. There's too much snow. Who cares about high school Shakespeare?" I imagine taking the bus to New York with Tiger, making plans under a blanket in the last row of the bus, watching all the people stumbling back to the toilet. I daydream about getting a job waitressing in a Greek diner off Broadway while Tiger washes dishes. Ushering in alley theaters where the actors go nude and moan about the government. Taking classes with a Swedish woman with a thick braid and a bum leg who says to me, "You're as good as they get."

My mother pours more coffee for Mr. Swick. She's put a sticker on the side of her coffee pot: "Danger: Hot Beverage." She raises her eyebrows and asks "Mind if I try a role on for size?"

"Yeah, Mom, you can lie down on the floor and play dead Juliet."

She swirls what's left in the pot and rolls her eyes. "It's that old cabin fever."

I can't help but blurt out, "And everybody wonders why Tiger De Soto took off." I immediately regret saying it. I know Mother will read volumes into this one stupid sentence. She'll start putting her clampers on me, wondering what I'm really thinking. Neither of them, not Mr. Swick or my mother, not even my dad with his direct phone line to Jesus, know what it's like to be in high school five days out of every seven. What it's like to have your whole world contained in the ten-block radius of the church, school, home and the fabric store. This, I know, is why I act. I have to feel what it's like in somebody else's skin.

By Monday morning, the storm is over and the roads get plowed. Driving back to school with Kimberly in the Pope's station wagon, I can't help but love all this snow. It's like we're flying over Siberia. I'm Lara, in Dr. Zhivago's sleigh. I don't ever want the temperature to go up, the snow to fade away, all this ice to melt. Kimberly sits in the front seat, ignoring her older brother, who's back from a culinary academy and chauffeuring us to and from school. Kimberly says he flunked out, and I'm sure because of it he stands naked in front of mirrors at night and thinks about food. He looks the type.

Kimberly spins the AM radio dial and announces "I swear, real music is an endangered species." Bursts of static pop out of the car speakers. I hear the single word "missing" from behind a chord of music and through the window, for just a second, I see Tiger out there. He's standing at the side of the road, watching the cars go by. He's standing still, hands behind his back, not wearing a hat, but then it's only a mailbox perched on top of a pole. Tiger's hair is a cap of frozen snow reflecting the sunlight.

After school, Mr. Swick calls the first all-cast rehearsal since the snow week. It's been six days since Tiger disappeared. Mr. Swick decides that we can just leave the Apothecary scene out and give Romeo a line in the next scene that would explain where he got the poison. No one complains about it. We all think that's pretty much the story with Shakespeare: you can take out any scene and nobody will really notice. As long as it isn't any of my scenes. The cast and crew sit in the theater seats while Mr. Swick gives us a pep talk and then Mr. and Mrs. De Soto come out from backstage. Everybody stops talking. Mrs. De Soto wears a plaid skirt and black stockings which look clumped above both knees. She has her hair pulled back into a ponytail. Her husband holds her around the waist and never looks up at us. They both wear open raincoats. It looks like they've gotten the season wrong.

Kimberly leans over to me and whispers, "Now, that's what I call an entrance."

Mr. Swick introduces them and Mrs. De Soto steps forward. "We've tried everything and we know most of you aren't friends but—" She stops and turns to look into her husband's face, but he's looking down. She bends a bit to see into his eyes, but he turns away, to the side. He's breaking one of the big rules of theater. You have to cheat-out toward the house at least a quarter turn so that the audience can see your face. He's disappearing into the back of the stage.

Mrs. De Soto's hands are moving fast, the fingers

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stretching out stiff then collapsing back into fists. "We've run out of leads," she says and then repeats herself louder so she's sure we can hear. I can't look anywhere but at Mrs. De Soto's sagging stockings peeking out from the bottom flap of her raincoat.

"Please," Mr. De Soto says, "he's a diabetic." He shrugs and walks off the stage. Diabetic, that doesn't sound right to me. Maybe his parents are just saying it to shock us into something heroic. Mrs. De Soto watches him go, then stumbles over to Mr. Swick. She talks to him with her hand hiding her mouth. Mr. Swick squeezes her shoulder before she turns to us one last time. Mrs. De Soto is standing in the exact spot where I stand in Act V when the Nurse discovers Juliet dead.

After she leaves, Mr. Swick doesn't say anything. He flips through the pages of his master script but he can't talk. He rubs his thumb at the bottom of his eye and just sits there. Kimberly, sitting next to me, says "Fuck" so softly I can barely hear it. Mr. Swick looks up into the stage lights, squinting. I see, in my head, Mr. and Mrs. De Soto back on the stage, in their rain gear, holding each other. Mrs. De Soto's stockings and the spit her husband kept wiping from his chin. That was a moment I should memorize. Remember, I tell myself, remember.

The night before we open, I go crazy over how much I don't know about Tiger. The play will have come and gone and nobody will have even missed him. The snow is melting and taking Tiger along with it. In a strange way, I want more snow so the play will be postponed again. We should wait for him.

I know that sometime earlier today my mom met with Mrs. De Soto. My dad suggested she call his mom up and offer some comfort. Tonight, my father's at church leading a class for parolees who have found Jesus and my mother's in her office, fiddling with her fabric. From the doorway, I can see her sitting in the light of a single lamp, sewing something by hand.

"Mother?"

"Tess," she says, slipping off her bifocals.

"How's Mrs. De Soto?"

"Not good." She leaves her needle pointing straight up, waiting for the next stitch.

"What's the last thing they know?" I ask. "About Tiger."

"Tuesday morning, he told them he was going out to shovel the driveway. And that's the last they saw of him." She plunges the needle into the dark fabric over her lap and keeps it there. That doesn't seem right to me, the shoveling snow business. I can't imagine Tiger doing things like that. What would he care about the driveway? He lied to them.

"Did you know him?" my mother asks and I'm not quite sure how to answer. Through the window, I can see the light from the full moon reflect off the snow drift pushed up against the house. I know there are plants under there, all kinds of green plants my mother and I planted together one summer.

Before I can think, I'm lying too. "He's in New York. He had to get out of here or he'd go crazy. He took the bus to be an actor in New York."

"An actor? My gosh." She takes a breath and says in a phony voice. "'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.'"

"What's that? Psalm 101?"

"It's As You Like It. Shakespeare. You read it when you get a chance."

Now *she* must be making things up.

"You tell your father about Tiger and New York. That could help."

I want to ask her if she believes you can be absolutely certain of someone without really knowing them but the air has become too heavy with lies. My throat tightens and I can't get out a syllable.

"Look here," she says, holding up the fabric she's working on. "I've lined your costume with cotton cloth so the burlap won't rub your skin raw. If it's too heavy, I can take it out."

I think of that garden of ours outside under all that snow and remember it's been five years since we worked on it together.

Minutes before opening curtain, Mr. and Mrs. De Soto come back to the theater. It's chilling the way they keep showing up. Dressed in our costumes, we stand in the wings and stare at them on the stage while they make their appeal to the audience. "Anyone with information", "calls can be anonymous" and everything else. I suspect they're repeating exactly what the police told them to say. Both of them seem over-rehearsed. But I can't take my eyes off Mrs. De Soto's hands. She holds them up to her stomach and her fingers wiggle on her belly like hooked fish. It's as if she's trying to keep all that she is afraid of pushed down to the ends of her limbs. Her voice is calm but her hands are wild.

A sense of gloom settles over the performance. We're all thinking about destroyed parents instead of star-crossed lovers. Kimberly forgets a line cue during the ball scene and asks Potpan, the servant boy, for Aqua Velva instead of an *aqua vitae*. In Act II, Scene V, when the Nurse brings secret news to Juliet about Romeo, my memory spins away and I grab at anything. I pick up some of my lines from my last scene, when the Nurse thinks Juliet's dead. Trudy Painter stares at me; she's definitely not looking dead at this point. She may not be an actress but she's a life-saver and she pulls me back into the scene. The damage is done, though; for the rest of the show, I'm Tess Powell, never the Nurse. In the last scene where Juliet and

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Romeo both die, the styrofoam tomb door won't open and I stand with Joshie Cohen, who plays Mercutio and is already dead, our fingers crossed hoping that that freshman who plays Paris can shake the door loose. It ends up that he can't so everybody in the finale—practically half the cast—has to jump off a riser into the tomb instead of walking through the door. After curtain, Mr. Swick tells us we've never been better.

In American History the next day, I get a note from the office that Mr. Swick wants to see me. My mother must have told my father what I said about Tiger and he told Mr. Swick, who probably told them I don't even know Tiger. Maybe Mr. Swick is mad at me because I broke character during the show last night. When I get to his office, I find him standing up, facing one wall. He has pictures all over of our high-school hits. Joshie Cohen as Willy Loman is up there. And so is that cherry tree that gets cut down at the end of The Cherry Orchard. Every time I'm in here, I'm reminded that I am not up there, not in any of the pictures. You have to die onstage in order to have a spot on Mr. Swick's wall.

Mr. Swick knows I'm standing here but he doesn't turn around.

"I know I flopped last night, Mr. Swick. And you're right, it's all because of motivation. I didn't really have any. But now I do. I thought about the Nurse over night and what she feels and I figured out that she does love Juliet just like she's her mother." Mr. Swick doesn't respond. He just reaches out and straightens a picture of Job's whole family from last year's production of J.B. "When Juliet was a baby, all she did was cry. She screamed all the time and the Nurse had little nicknames for her but really, she was always afraid that something was wrong, that something awful was going to happen to Juliet just like it happened to Susan. So she gets this habit of shaking her hands all the time. She holds them but they twitch, they can't stop twitching. She may act zany the whole play but that's a front. It's a mask. That sense of humor is covering up all her fear. Don't you see?"

Mr. Swick turns around but he's not happy about my breakthrough. It's probably too late. I can't change anything now. I'll have to save it for another show.

"Tiger De Soto's been found," Mr. Swick says and his voice sounds off, too flat and dry. "His body, right outside his house."

I have to sit down but I miss the seat of the chair. I end up sitting on the armrest, the metal biting through denim into skin.

"I didn't want you all to hear it from somebody else. I didn't want to make a scene. I thought this way was best." He places his hands on the top of his desk and drops his weight into his arms. "Apparently, he went out to shovel. He was walking around his house and fell in a window well."

"Is he all right?"

"He suffocated." Mr. Swick moves to another picture, pushing one corner up out of balance. All the pictures are crooked. Off by inches. Everything was straight once. Now he's gone and straightened them all crooked.

"We won't have a performance tonight, Tess. But tomorrow night, we'll close with one more show."

For the rest of the day, I look around at faces, trying to decide who knows and who doesn't. I hear that Tiger fell upside down, that he choked and vomited, that when the snow melted, his mother found him from inside pushed up against the basement window.

After school, I sit by myself in the last row of the dark theater. To get my mind off things, I try to think how I'll play my last scene now. Act IV, Scene V. Trudy's laid out in the prop bed, the covers up to her blank face. She's holding her breath, trying to look knocked out. But she takes tiny gasps that shake the sheets. My lines come into my head. "Ah, my lady. She's dead. She's dead. Alack the day!" Onstage, I see myself looking up to what I imagine is God, but all I can make out is the stage lights aimed right for my eyes. All I see is that blaze of whiteness and I think of snow, eight feet of snow. I remember the empty color of Mrs. De Soto's skin, more white than white. And the blond of Tiger's hair, without a single strand of brown. Juliet is lying before me and I see all this and I think...now, right now, I am the Nurse. □

OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

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SHINER

A Story by Tim Tomlinson

Cliff could have explained to his father that Lee Strang was older. Lee Strang didn't even belong in the fifth grade. He'd been left back at least once, but everyone suspected twice. Twice would have made Lee Strang a seventh grader. Seventh graders are thirteen, teenagers, not eleven, like Cliff. Teenagers get sideburns, they start shaving. Lee Strang said he shaved twice a week. Fifth graders don't shave, Cliff could have explained to his father, fifth graders don't even shave once a week.

Cliff could have explained that Lee Strang came from Nassau County, so close to the City you could have called him a City kid. He could have explained that Lee Strang cheated. Each time before Lee Strang had hit Cliff, his left hand shot out from his side fast as a line drive and landed on Cliff's left arm, Cliff's blocking arm, his guard. He held Cliff's guard arm down, and with no guard to contend with, no left swatting away his punches, Lee Strang had easily nailed Cliff's temple, hard—he was older, and practically from the City—seven, eight, maybe ten times before the recess monitors had broken it up. Each time Cliff shook off the punch, and he swore Lee Strang would never grab his guard arm again, but each time he did. Cliff could see him doing it, planning it, lunging forward, his left leg leading, his left arm shooting out, the hand slapping down on and clamping Cliff's forearm, pushing it down, and each time Cliff would be powerless to stop it. He'd feel his left arm go useless, it was in Lee Strang's control, he couldn't pull it back, or up, or away, or out of reach. And somehow his left arm freezing up like that would freeze up his right arm. It couldn't reach down to help, it couldn't tear Lee Strang's hand away, and it couldn't shoot out and hit Lee Strang as Lee Strang's right arm swung out wildly toward him. And he'd see that each time, the right arm winding out in a roundhouse from Lee Strang's shoulder, not even a great punch in terms of efficiency, a punch with wasted motion, a punch which announced itself, gave itself away, revealed its target. A punch so inefficient in fact that it gave the opponent options, it gave the opponent time to block, or duck, or even to throw and land a punch, all before that wild undisciplined roundhouse curved widely through its arc and arrived. But still Cliff couldn't stop it, or get out of its way as it curled through space toward his temple. He could have explained that to his father, how he couldn't get out of its way, even though he knew it was coming, even though he had so much time, how all he could do was watch it, how it started backwards bent at the elbow like a pitcher's wind-up, then swung out reaching into its length, gathering its force, then snapped forward and started coming, and kept coming, the fist growing and growing, white knuckles the size of silver dollars, of cue balls, Cliff watching it wide-eyed and helpless until—pow! His head snapped sideways and back, his ears ringing like when he set off rolls of caps below rocks, or when he stood too near exploding M-80's.

The first time he got hit by Lee Strang he knew he'd never been hit harder, except by his father, and maybe his mother. He could have explained that to his father. He could have explained that he got hit so hard it was almost funny, funny that someone could be that strong that young—older than Cliff, of course, maybe two years older, but still young, still just a kid. It was funny that someone that young could hit that hard, the way it was funny how strong Cliff's dog Wolf was, how you could feel Wolf's strength when you played tug-of-war with him, or even walked him, how effortless his strength was and how focused his intention, and how those things could make Cliff laugh, how those things were part of what was fun about the dog. How they would make his father laugh, too, like Sonny Liston's power. How that kind of power was so powerful and so scary it turned funny. That's the kind of power in Lee Strang's punches, Cliff could have explained, and his father would have understood, and he would have laughed, and they could have laughed together, the way they did with Wolf.

Cliff could have explained how Lee Strang's older brother was Keith Strang, and how Keith Strang was Lee Strang's coach. He was right there on the field. He should have been in maybe 9th grade, at least 8th, but he'd been left back too. Cliff could have explained how Lee Strang's older brother Keith had beaten up a Police Athletic League Golden Gloves, not only that, he'd belonged to a gang back where the Strangs came from and once he was arrested. He carried a can opener tied to a length of electrical cord. Twice a week in shop he filed the point. He swung it around in loops when he was just hanging out wasting time. From the sidelines he told Lee Strang how to cheat, he urged him on and cheered wildly each time Lee Strang's punches landed.

Who did Cliff have? he could have explained to his father. Wally? Wally was a pussy. Wally never taught Cliff a thing. And Wally never beat anyone up except Cliff, and then only because he grabbed him by surprise and held him in hammerlocks. When someone bigger than Lee Strang bothered Lee Strang, Lee Strang could remind them who his older brother was. Cliff couldn't do that.

Cliff could have explained to his father that no one had ever taught him how to fight, really fight, not to mention how to cheat. He could have agreed with his

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father that it was important to do sit-ups and push-ups, to build strength by lifting weights, to skip rope and shadow-box and hit the speed bag and the body bag. But those things were just things, he needed to explain to his father. Lee Strang was real. He was older, he came from the City, and his brother swung a sharpened can opener from a wire at the sidelines and coached him how to cheat. How many sit-ups you did per minute or where you maxed out on the bench didn't matter, Cliff could have explained, when older guys from the city flung roundhouse punches arcing through space toward your temple.

Cliff could have explained all that, he wanted to, he planned to. His mother called him, "Your father wants to see you," she'd said, and he'd climbed the stairs slowly, planning what to say and how to say it. His eye hurt. An egg-sized lump vibrated over the socket. It was big as a wad of Silly Putty, Silly Putty that's already picked up the ink from the comics. It was warm and it vibrated and Cliff could barely see around it, his eye was nearly shut. He wondered how black it was, how soft, how tender. It shocked him each time he touched it, how far from his face it swelled, how the pain stopped his fingers way before they actually reached his face. He thought he must look like a Martian card. How fast could it heal? he wondered. And how long would he carry a mark of shame? He wondered how much he'd have to explain to his father, how much his father would need to know in order to understand what things were really like, now, for Cliff. How much things had changed.

He could explain that he'd never lost a fight before, this was the first time, that could be important to know. He could explain how, for instance, every quarter, regular as report cards, Teddy Stakowsi called him out. "After school," he'd tell Cliff, "at the bike racks." And at the bike racks, after the buses had gone, he tried to beat Cliff up, but he couldn't. Teddy Stakowski was a 6th grader. Still, Cliff beat him up, every time. But he beat him up just enough, he'd explain to his father, the way his father taught him. Cliff wasn't allowed to beat anyone up unless they tried to beat him up first, but then he was only allowed to beat them up enough. "You don't have to empty the six-shooter," his father told him, and Cliff didn't. In fact, the last time he just emptied one bullet, that's all it took. One shot to the solar plexus, and Teddy Stakowski went down on both knees, sucking air, feeling blindly around with one hand, crying between gasps that he would kill Cliff, but Cliff knew he wouldn't. Maybe Cliff could explain about that, and that might make his father laugh, the way the kids who saw it laughed. Cliff thought it might be a good idea to make his father laugh first, and then explain all the rest, about the eye and all. Because while Cliff knew he wasn't allowed to beat anyone up, he didn't know if he was allowed to get beat up himself. He suspected he wasn't, but he'd never had to find out before this. This was new.

So was Lee Strang, new. Pretty new, anyway. No one had any real idea how strong Lee Strang was, or if they should fear him, except for the fact that he was older and came from the city. He could have explained that maybe Lee Strang would be the most feared guy on the playground now, but that would still make Cliff the second. And it would make him the most feared fifth grader who really was a fifth grader. He would still be the most feared guy for his age. But that was a technicality and Cliff knew it. His father would say "you're rationalizing." He'd say, "Don't crap a crapper. You can't shit a shitter. Bullshit me, but don't bullshit yourself."

Cliff could have explained how the whole thing really didn't matter so much anyway, how he and Lee Strang had made friends already. They had been friends before and they made friends again. It was just an argument. You argue, then things go back to the way they were, like the way Cliff's father argues with Cliff's mother, Cliff could have pointed out. She smashes a few plates, a few glasses, he puts his fist through the door, then it's back to normal. They don't stay mad forever, a few days, maybe a week, but nobody makes fun of the one who lost. Not like Mr. Rossi, Cliff's teacher, who'd made fun of Cliff in front of the class. He'd laughed out loud when the recess monitors brought Cliff and Lee Strang in to him, Cliff could tell his father. "That," Mr. Rossi said, gleefully, "is what is known as a shiner!" And the class had laughed, all of them, the boys and the girls. Cliff tried to laugh, too, he wanted to make it appear as if he got the shiner just from playing rough at recess. Maybe they'd think he'd run into the monkey bars, or a hard grounder hit a stone and took a wicked hop. It made it worse, he thought, if you got the shiner in a fight, in real anger. So he laughed, and the class laughed, and Lee Strang laughed, and Mr. Rossi laughed. He led them past the lockers down to the principal's office, laughing and telling about a time he gave some bully a shiner. "But that shiner," Mr. Rossi said, "was nothing like this shiner. I wouldn't even call that shiner a shiner after seeing this shiner. This shiner is a shiner!" he said. And Cliff laughed, as though the story and the shiner were about somebody else, some other guy, a bully, not Cliff. "Don't tell me that's one punch," Mr. Rossi said, "it couldn't be, a shiner that big. Thing's the size of an egg!" Mr. Rossi exclaimed, squeezing Lee Strang's biceps, whistling at their fullness, their solidity. Lee Strang shrugged. He didn't say anything. Cliff wanted to say something. It wasn't one punch, it was ten, maybe twelve, and they were cheating punches, he'd held Cliff's arm, and they weren't even efficient punches, they were roundhouse punches, awkward slow inefficient punches that landed not because they were

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good punches but because of a combination of things, the most important thing being that Lee Strang cheated, he was older, and his brother Keith swung a can opener from the sidelines cheering. "That's not one egg," Mr. Rossi said, pressing his thumb against Cliff's scalpline, making Cliff wince, "it's the whole dozen." And the three of them laughed again.

Cliff could have explained to Principal Toons that he didn't need to see any nurse, that seeing Nurse Fellows would just make everything worse, but he didn't. He just shook his head no, and said "I'm fine" when Principal Toons persisted. "It doesn't even hurt," Cliff told him, and Principal Toons told him it would. "Just stop in and have her look at it," he told Cliff. "Make her feel like she's useful." And when Cliff and Lee Strang were done getting in trouble for fighting they left the Principal's office together and together they walked right past the nurse's office and they laughed about that and were friends again, and Cliff even waited with Lee Strang while Lee Strang got on his bus and shouted from the window. "See you tomorrow," Cliff had told him, but secretly he hoped he wouldn't have to come to school tomorrow because tomorrow the shiner would be black, black and blue, and his eye would still be closed, and sometimes it might tear, and someone might confuse the eye tearing, which shiners sometimes do, with Cliff crying, which Cliff never did, had never, and wouldn't now, at least not at school, or at recess, or after school around other people. He could have explained to his father how even though he'd made friends with Lee Strang, that that just seemed like the smartest thing to do at the time, but that he didn't really feel like Lee Strang's friend and that really he wanted to kill him, for cheating, for the shiner, for everything, and that one day he would, he'd go and practice in the meantime, on the speed bag, on the body bag, he'd increase his push-ups, he'd throw punches with the pulleys weighted even heavier, and the next time, the next time he'd come running home to tell his father what happened instead of being called up from the basement by his mother. He could have explained all that to his father, climbing the stairs slowly he thought about it all, all of it that his father might need to know in order to appreciate what Cliff was feeling, and in order to tell him how to prevent it in the future, and how to get back, and how to avoid humiliation, and how to stand up to it, too, like a man, and bear it. His father might be able to tell him things like that, like which one would be better, to go into school the next day and just take all the ribbing, while his eye purpled and swelled and teared, or go into school and beat up anyone who said anything about it except Lee Strang, or not go into school and not have to face all the teasing, but then have to face it all anyway when he finally did return to school, his eye almost back to normal, the fight a distant memory in the wake of all the other fights during recess or after school at the bike racks. Cliff could have explained that the fight hadn't even really felt like a fight. It was no knock-down get-up battle to exhaustion, like Alan Ladd against Ben Johnson in "Shane." There hadn't been any blood, no doubling over in pain, nobody said, "I give." Cliff would never have given, he could have explained to his father, and if it hadn't been broken up, in two, maybe three more punches he would have figured out Lee Strang's rhythm, and he would have charged Lee Strang. He would have broken through the screen of Lee Strang's punches and cheating and extra years and he would have leapt head first into Lee Strang's stomach and he would have brought Lee Strang down hard, hard onto the playground. He would have landed right on top of Lee Strang and Lee Strang's air and all his strength would have expired in one thick thud, and then Cliff would have been all over Lee Strang, all over his face and nose and temples and sideburns, Cliff's arms like tomahawks cracking down onto Lee Strang's cheeks and lips and clubbing into his nose and skull until he was pulled off by a crowd of teachers and monitors while Lee Strang covered his broken bloody face screaming.

Cliff could have explained all of that to his father, who sat in his rocker looking at Cliff, Cliff wasn't sure how, but he couldn't explain. He wanted to, he planned to, but the words wouldn't come.

"Well?" his father asked, and Cliff couldn't find his tongue. He could feel it, thick in this throat, and he could feel the tears pushing up under his shiner, and tears thick as egg whites flooding over his other eye, and he could feel his breath catch in his chest, and through his good eye he could make out his father's form, blurry as if through a rainy windshield, the tattoos splotchy, the muscles softened, less defined. And he could hear the girls laughing and Mr. Rossi laughing and Keith Strang cheering and Lee Strang's punches exploding. And he could feel his reasons why, all his words and all his excuses, the rationalizations and the technicalities, all of it building up inside him like air pressure in a balloon. He could feel it all rushing up his lungs, his throat, pushing at his cheeks and lips, trying to escape. But Cliff swallowed, he swallowed it all. And then he explained.

"I lost," Cliff said to his father.

"Say it again," his father said, leaning forward and turning down the TV.

Cliff's chin came up off his chest and he looked straight at his father through the tears in one eye and the narrow squint of the shiner.

"I lost," Cliff repeated. "I got beat up."

Cliff's father set the *Newsday* aside. "You what?" he said.

"In a fight," Cliff explained. "I got a shiner."

"I can see that," his father said. "Is that all?"

Cliff swallowed again, hard.

"Yes, sir," Cliff said. "That's all." □

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The Soccer Parents

SUSAN STERLING

THE SOCCER PARENTS are unhappy. It's a Saturday afternoon in late October, the play-offs for the State Cup, northern division, and our team is losing. Well, not losing exactly—it's a scoreless game—but the girls need to win. And they can't score, they can't finish it off. "Let's go, girls!" the soccer parents shout, and "Come on, girls, let's get a goal!" and "Let's go, Blue!" This is meant to be encouragement, but anyone can hear we are really irritated because the girls can't score.

And we want them to score. We need them to score because they are more experienced than the other team and should be winning by now. And last weekend, at the start of the play-offs, they lost when they could have tied. It had rained the night before and the girls were slipping around on the muddy field, and then a fullback on our team kicked the ball into our goal. The ball went off her cleat and past our goalie, giving our opponents the winning score. A pall fell over all of us watching from the sidelines. We can't kick it in the other goal, but we can kick it in *our* goal! No one said that out loud, of course. We all murmured, "That's okay," but we couldn't believe it, because that's the kind of thing the girls used to do four and five years ago, when they were six years old and just starting soccer, before they'd had soccer camps and uniforms and expensive team jackets. The girl who kicked it into our goal cried, and the goalie cried, and the other girls ran up and comforted them. Several girls put their arms around the goalie and said, "That's okay," and then the coaches said the girls had to get on with the game, mistakes happen, but it was the end of the second half, and we all knew what that goal meant. It meant we might not go to the finals for the State Cup.

So this afternoon the October sky is pale, but the field is dry. It's the second weekend of the play-offs, and the game is well into the second half, with no score. It's what we hoped for last weekend, but this weekend if the girls only tie they might not make the finals for the State Cup. And so we're not happy, we parents, bunched on the sidelines, watching our daughters out there on the field. We listen to the referees' whistles and the girls' shouts and the smack of cleats against leather, and we look up at the bare trees beyond the field, and we're tense and anxious, though we're trying not to show it, because we have spent all fall out here, giving up our weekends to watch the girls play, to encourage them on with "Let's go, Blue!"

And if they're not winning, some parents murmur, then it must be because they're not trying hard enough. And if you look out on the field, where our girls are chasing after the ball and stumbling and picking themselves up, all dirty and sweaty, you know they *could* be running faster, because sometimes the girls on the other team get to the ball first. ("But then, again, what does it matter," one of the fathers mutters, "because even when our girls get the ball and bring it down the field, they can't score! We're dominating this game, we've already had twenty shots at goal, so who knows what the hell's happening out there?") He believes—many of the parents believe—the problem is one of desire. We never mention any names, of course, because everyone wants to be friendly and supportive. No one would ask a particular girl's parents if they send her outside with her ball after supper, if they are instilling a fighting spirit. But a few parents wonder, among themselves, why *that* girl is starting when she keeps losing the ball. And some parents suspect that it's politics, since the coaches' daughters play the entire game, and that's politics, too. "Hearts are being broken out there on the field," confides one mother, "but I won't second-guess the coaches. I know my role is to encourage." So she yells, "Come *on*, girls, get the *ball!*" but of course she notices—we all notice—which girl looks dreamily toward the woods for a moment, as if she were thinking of her cat, or does a little skip when she should be racing toward the goal. Or that girl who runs her hand through her hair at a critical moment when she should be paying attention to the ball (and why doesn't she put her *heart* into the game?) And today it seems the whole team's not paying attention. Not even the girl who cried because she missed two penalty kicks. ("And they had two penalty kicks, did you see that, and they couldn't even get *those* in, my God!" complains another father.)

So the soccer parents pace along the sidelines and mutter to each other and look worried—even those of us who tend to be quiet during the games pace and look worried. And if there are some who are not happy with this parental scene, we don't mention it to each other

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because that would be disloyal. That would look as if we didn't have the right spirit to pass on to our daughters. Maybe we don't, or maybe *I* don't, because sometimes I find myself perversely hoping the other team will get a goal, just to show up the soccer parents, just to spite them—as if I weren't one, too, as if my daughter weren't on the team, and I didn't want her to get a goal, or at least an assist, and be a star player.

And she's not a star. She's an eleven-year-old girl who plays the piano and violin and is a good mimic and mathematician and likes *Seaquest* and *Star Trek* and watching *Lambchop's Sing-a-long* when she's home sick from school. She's not a star at all, though she plays her position well and can pass, which is why she was chosen for this team. What she likes best is being with the other girls, but she wishes they didn't play soccer every weekend. It's too much soccer for her—she knows her feelings about this—and she tells me, when I talk of my friends' daughter, who at seventeen was on a girls' soccer team that won the Nationals in Minneapolis, that I have told her about this girl *three times*, and she is not going to be like that, and I say I know, and I do know. So why do I keep talking about the daughter of my friends, who is a soccer star?

And sometimes I know (days later, because I have no perspective on the game at all when I'm watching) the problem for us, as parents, has to do with our not getting enough love, years ago, and not feeling like stars ourselves. And now we have daughters who have a chance to do what we couldn't—we mothers, anyway—when no one took girls' sports seriously and/or noticed much if a girl handled a ball well. Because of that, I suspect, we mothers are worse with tone. Both mothers and fathers stand on the sidelines and yell encouragement and mutter, "They aren't trying hard enough, they don't want it enough, they aren't hungry." The fathers shake their heads in disbelief and huddle in little groups, discussing strategy—but those are their little girls, after all, and many of them have sons. It's still more important for boys to be good at sports, they think, though it isn't fashionable to say this out loud any more.

So it's the mothers who really can't stand it when the ball goes wide of the net yet another time. It's the mothers, mostly, who shout from the sidelines, "You need to run faster, girls! You aren't running fast enough!" The girls are racing down the field now, passing the ball, and they're panting and their faces are red and their knees hurt, because someone has knocked them down or they've tripped, and their elbows are bleeding, and they're only ten and eleven years old. We barely notice their falls, though, or if we do, we think they just have to try harder not to trip—they have to run harder. They have to run, and run, and keep running, and we'll encourage them. "Come on, girls! Run! We *need* a goal!" the soccer parents shout, as if the girls hadn't noticed, as if they didn't know they need to get a goal to win. "Run!"

And because we believe they simply need to be tougher, we never worry that maybe someday the girls will hear us so well that they'll keep on running—past the goal posts, past the school buildings, past the playing fields and the river and the woods, past the golf course and far away from our town. They'll keep on running, and trying harder, only they won't be wearing yellow shorts and blue shirts anymore, and they won't be passing a soccer ball. They'll be running and running, farther and farther away, and we'll hope desperately that they aren't alone, that they are happy even though we never hear from them, because how could they have thought they had failed us? They're out in the world and running, and they still hear our anxious voices, urging them on, telling them they aren't trying hard enough.

They don't come back. We never see them again. Yet sometimes, years later, when we're very quiet, we imagine we hear them again, just outside the windows, in the fields behind the school. It's summer and they're all together, and they've taken off their cleats and are playing barefoot in the grass. They're just running around, laughing and kicking the ball to each other, the way they did when they were small, but they know more tricks now and they like that. They can dribble and pass and head the ball, and they can fake each other out and do perfect throw-ins. They're quick—quicker even than their older brothers—and they're excited, because they're ten and eleven years old and they're together again and they're happy—you can hear it in their voices as they call out to each other. They feel wonderfully strong, and they like their bodies, which can do so many things, and they're proud of themselves. "Look!" they call out (and we hope they're calling to us, but we're not certain). "Look at us! We're good at this, you know?" □

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Vonnegut's *Timequake*

LOREE RACKSTRAW

Timequake, by Kurt Vonnegut.
(Putnam's. $22.95)

THE LONG-AWAITED NEW Kurt Vonnegut novel, which he vows is his last, is purportedly a story of how he failed to write a novel he now calls "Timequake One." The protagonist of that book was none other than good old Kilgore Trout, who described the nature of the timequake as "a cosmic charley horse in the sinews of Destiny" in his unfinished memoir entitled *My Ten Years on Automatic Pilot*. It was a cosmic event that occurred on February 13 in the year 2001, when "the Universe suffered a crisis in self-confidence" about the purpose of expanding indefinitely.

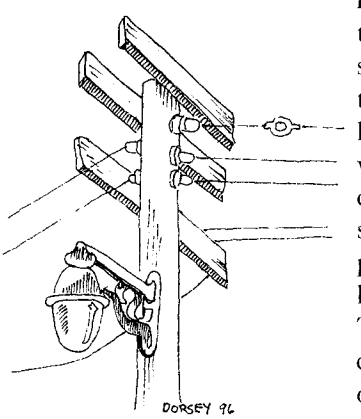
We know all this because Vonnegut explains in a Preface that the failed novel was like Hemingway's big fish in *The Old Man and the Sea* . Rather than use it for shark bait after working on it for nearly a decade, he decided to fillet the fish and make a stew from "its best parts mixed with thoughts and experiences" of the past and present.

A central motif meandering through *Timequake* is the premise of the failed "Timequake One." Namely: "that a sudden glitch in the space-time continuum, made everybody and everything do exactly what they'd done during a past decade—a second time."

Kilgore Trout and some 16 of his hilarious short stories (and one play!) also meander through to help us understand the significance of the cosmic crisis which he explains as follows:

> after fibrillating with indecision the Universe "suddenly shrunk ten years. It zapped me and everybody else back to February 17th, 1991. That the rerun lasted ten years, short a mere four days, some are saying now, is proof that there is a God, and that He is on the Decimal System. He has ten fingers and toes, just as we do, they say, and uses them when He does arithmetic."

But God's mathematical preference (and Vonnegut's ten-year struggle with this book) are not the real significance of the timequake. Rather, it's the vehicle whereby Vonnegut can introduce a new message of energizing hope after a lifetime of misanthropic worry in his fiction. And who is it who finds that energizing element which got lost from Pandora's box of miseries? Why none other than his often used counterpart, Kilgore Trout, who, after living most of his life as a cynical hobo, spends his last days with a loving extended family in the luxury of the Ernest Hemingway Suite of the writer's retreat Xanadu, in the summer resort village of Point Zion, Rhode Island.The retreat appears to be a reward for his heroic efforts during the disaster which ensued once the timequake finished its ten-year rerun and "free will kicked in again."



The timequake is yet another Vonnegut metaphorical device in his long literary effort to defamiliarize the disintegrating cultural condition of America, in the hope that it might shock citizens into an awareness of their careless disregard of the true potential of human uniqueness and ideals.

In *Timequake*, people so used to not paying attention to steering their own courses in life or caring about what was liable to happen next, suffered from a syndrome that Kilgore Trout called "Post-timequake apathy, or PTA." When the "cosmic déjà vu" was over, people suffering from PTA in the daytime time zones of the Western Hemisphere suddenly were on their own with disastrous results. They fell down if they had been walking, or drove their cars into buildings or suffered other accidents of inertia, such as at the bottoms of staircases and escalators or in airplanes that were on automatic pilot.

THE UNFOLDING OF THIS remarkable event is what Vonnegut, like a story-teller who keeps wandering off the track, characteristically interrupts by clicking (sans computer) into another time zone of his own life experience (or Trout's), or into another comment about human cruelty or greed or naïveté or kindness. Early in this narrative, he reflects on a series of extended family memories, beginning with those of his beloved sister Alice. In particular, he recalls how both he and she would be helplessly convulsed by the slapstick humor of people unexpectedly falling down. This was what he called "Allie's kind of porno: People deprived of dignified postures by gravity instead of sex."

Kilgore Trout, however, was startled into action "after free will kicked in" on February 13th, 2001, when he heard the sounds of cars crashing. At that moment, at the age of eighty-four, he was living with other homeless bums in a shel-

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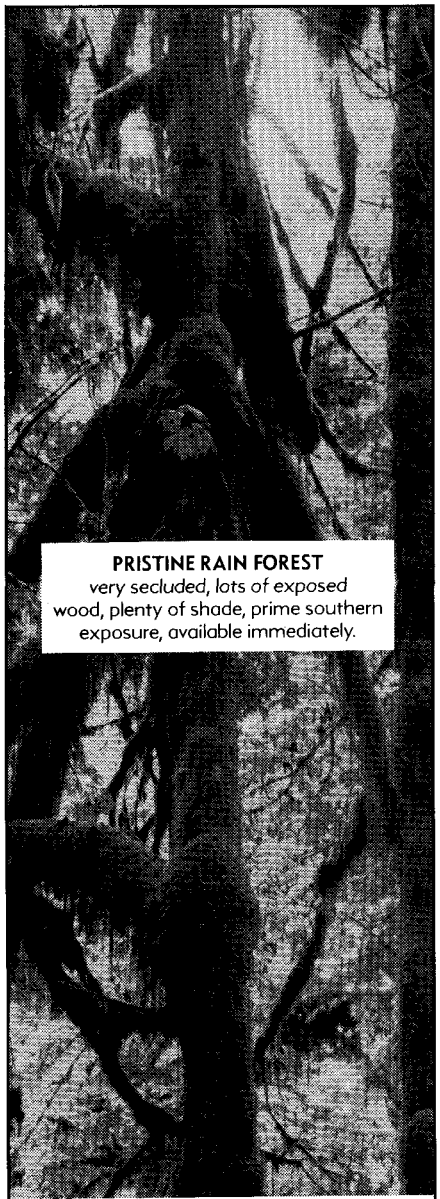
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ter that had once been the Museum of the American Indian, located next door to the American Academy of Arts and Letters at the far end of 155th Street in Manhattan. (The Indian Museum had been moved to a safer location downtown five years earlier.) The Academy had been fortified with steel doors, armed guards, and a bazooka—and was administered by an Executive Secretary named Monica Pepper, the wife of Zoltan Pepper.

These details are important for several reasons: they give Vonnegut the opportunity to comment on the insanity of urban violence and poverty, and to discourse on the Academy's long tradition, authorized by Congress in 1916, of honoring American artists and scholars, citizens now made irrelevant by television and computers. It also introduces two characters ironically connected to Vonnegut and his alter ego: Monica looks like his sister Allie, and Zoltan had plagiarized a Kilgore Trout story when he was a schoolboy and is now stunned to find new stories by Trout regularly turning up in the wire waste can in front of the Academy.

When the "cosmic rerun" is over, Trout is mobilized by the sound of a berserk fire truck crashing into the Academy next door (instantly killing Zoltan Pepper). Since everyone seems immobilized by shock, he tries shouting "Free will! Free will!" to startle the Academy guard, Dudley Prince, out of his catatonic state, but to no avail. Suddenly he is inspired to shout a new mantra: "You've been very sick, but now you're well again, and there's work to do!"

Success! He gets Dudley and the two other armed guards to throw the bums out of the shelter so he can set up a triage hospital in this former American Indian Museum. He sends the Peppers' chauffeur out to broadcast Kilgore's Creed to the world by lying to CBS that "everybody was recovering from a nerve gas attack by persons unknown."

Given that exclusive, CBS can tell everyone that they are well now, and must get to work, and be sure that all children and old people are safe. So by the end of the month, when military law is established and the Academy's offices turned into an officers' club, Monica and her staff drive Kilgore Trout to Point Zion and Xanadu where he can live out his days in comfort and safety. There he is welcomed by a loving extended family including members of the Pembroke Mask and Wig Club, the Xanadu household staff, members of the chapters of Alcoholics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous which meet in the Xanadu ballroom, and battered children, women and grandparents who also have found shelter there and are grateful for Trout's mantra.

And it is there that his authorial creator and some of the author's friends and relatives, both dead and alive, join Trout's extended family for a cast party clambake on the beach at Xanadu following the Mask and Wig production of the Robert Sherwood play, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*. Trout calls the play a "man-made timequake," and he is given a role in producing the production's sound effects: the steam engine whistle in the play's last scene, when Lincoln is about to leave Illinois by train to assume the presidency in Washington.

The play gives Vonnegut the opportunity to quote Lincoln's eloquent farewell message in which he recounts the ideals of the American Union. This allows him to let us hear a sob of appreciation for the beauty of Lincoln's statement from Kilgore Trout as the curtain descends. And it allows him to provide his readers with a benedictory message: to honor and celebrate the sacred uniqueness of human awareness in the universe.

THIS IS SURELY THE MELLOWEST book in Vonnegut's long literary career. His previous novel, *Hocus Pocus*, published seven years ago as a tribute to fellow Hoosier Eugene Debs and his socialist ideals, was likewise set in a deteriorating America in the year 2001. Narrated by a Vietnam Veteran named after Debs, its themes were focused on the absurd cruelties

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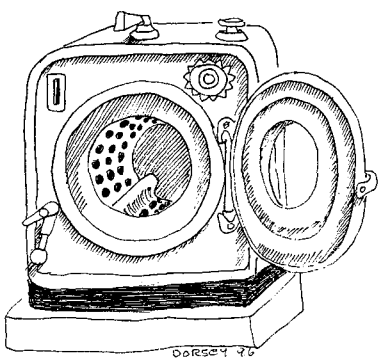
of war and the ironic capitalist "justice" that Japan now owned much of the United States, especially ironic, given the aftermath of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

While *Timequake* most certainly draws attention to the cruelty humans wreak upon each other, it nonetheless is infused with spirited humor and warmth. The author's resurrection of Kilgore Trout and his incredible off-the-wall stories add a vitalizing element and brilliant timing to his social criticism that was missing in *Hocus Pocus*, and makes one think Vonnegut may have missed his calling as a stand-up comic.

The first Trout story, "No Laughing Matter," for example, shows what might have happened during World War II if soldiers had used free will. The title comes from what the judge said at the secret court-martial of the crew of the bomber "Joy's Pride," which had been commanded to fly to Yokohama to drop a third atomic bomb on Japan at the end of the War. The pilot, for whose mother the plane had been named, decided his mother would not be "happy that her son's airplane had killed a world's record number of civilians all at once." So he made a U-turn and flew back to the Pacific base island of Banalulu with the huge, purple bomb still intact, slung beneath the plane's belly. It had been fastened underneath the plane because it was too big to fit inside the bomb bay. When the plane landed, the bomb only cleared the tarmac by a foot, causing mass hysteria and all kinds of collisions from ground crew vehicles. When the prosecutor described what people did at the base when the plane landed, everyone at the court-martial broke into laughter. "This caused the chief judge to bang his gavel and declare that what those on trial had done was 'no laughing matter.'" (Never mind that as soon as the judge restored order, a huge crack opened in the floor of the Pacific and "swallowed Banalulu, court-martial, Joy's Pride, unused bomb and all.")



Another Trout story, "The Sisters B-36," takes the television industry to task for its deadly effect on human imagination and on the civilizing influence of the arts: three sisters live on the planet Booboo in the Crab Nebula, where it's only a coincidence that "the written language of Booboo was like English on Earth, in that it consisted of idiosyncratic arrangements in horizontal lines of twenty-six phonetic symbols, ten numbers, and about eight punctuation marks." Little Booboolings were taught to be excited by minimal stimuli from these idiosyncratic arrangements and by "dabs of pigments on flat surfaces in frames." This was beneficial because it caused them to grow brain circuits that made civilized pleasures and behaviors automatic.

Two of the B-36 sisters were popular because one was a painter and the other a short-story writer, but everyone was bored by the third one, who was a scientist and could only talk about thermodynamics. Out of envy, the third sister designed TV cameras and transmitters and receivers, and got money from her rich mother to manufacture and market them. They were instantly popular, even though they made imaginations and thinking redundant. But the third sister was still angry, because she was boring as ever. "So she invented automobiles and computers and barbedwire and flamethrowers and landmines and machine-guns," and thus, "the "Booboolings became among the most merciless creatures in the local family of galaxies."

Vonnegut interweaves a number of his other social concerns and disastrous accidents into the fabric of this novel, but they balance nicely with positive epiphanies from his own life, as for example that of his Uncle Alex, who taught him to be sure to notice it when things were going really well. At such points he was taught to say out loud: "If this isn't nice, what is?" Adding to this positive balance are other family tributes and self-deprecating anecdotes and ironic jokes that generously color the text. The most colorful irony must be that which sets up the Pembroke Mask and Wig production of *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* toward the novel's end.

Here Vonnegut weaves a wild tale stemming from the actual assassination of President Lincoln, to the effect that John Wilkes Booth had seduced the neglected wife of a fictional Assistant Secretary of the Navy during the Civil War, one Elias Pembroke. When his wife, Julia, discovered she had conceived a child from this affair, she was worried that the offspring would have the same pointed ears as Booth. Not to worry: Abraham Lincoln Pembroke showed no resemblance, and grew up to found the largest textile mill in New England. In the generations that followed, there was not an actor or a murderer in the bunch, until Abraham Lincoln Pembroke III fathered an illegitimate son in 1947 with an unmarried African-American housemaid, Rosemary Smith. The issue of that union, Frank Smith, grew up to give "a stunningly convincing matinee performance in the title role" of *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* produced by the Pembroke Mask and Wig Club founded by his great great grandmother!

KURT VONNEGUT OPINES in this book that he is growing old and finding it difficult to write. His still remarkably large following will wish otherwise. *Timequake* may not be regarded as equal to the best of his previous 18 books, but it is a brilliant and celebratory benediction to the country he unashamedly loves, and to the struggling humane culture he continues to salute and sustain And if that isn't nice, what is?. □

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Mother Night as Film

JEROME KLINKOWITZ

IT IS A COMMONPLACE of Vonnegut criticism that this novelist's work has not been well served by film. Relatively few of his widely read books have been translated to the screen, and for those adapted the success rate is low. Kurt Vonnegut himself wrote the screenplay for *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, learning in the process that what works on stage is not necessarily effective in cinema. *Slapstick*, an unlikely candidate for film in the first place, suffered from the self-indulgence of Jerry Lewis as producer, director, and star. Even director George Roy Hill's masterpiece rendition of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, successful on its own terms as a film, is unable to incorporate one of the novel's most important elements: Kurt Vonnegut himself, who is present as the writer struggling to tell his basically untellable story. There is, in short, no one to say "so it goes" when somebody or something dies. As Vonnegut readily admits, the film is one character short: himself.

Thus writer-producer Robert B. Weide faced a challenge in making Vonnegut's *Mother Night* into a major motion picture. As the author's third novel, it is an early work; though popular as an item in Vonnegut's canon, it was written in obscurity, published in the vacuum of paperback originals, and has attracted less critical attention than his other works. It is, moreover, structured in the manner peculiar to Vonnegut's initial novels, adopting a familiar subgeneric form as its excuse for being. As *Player Piano* had used the message of dystopia, *The Sirens of Titan* employed common devices of space opera, and *Cat's Cradle* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* would rely on the formats of apocalyptic narrative and the prince-pauper story, so too was *Mother Night* present in a reader-friendly shape. Its packaging as a 1961 Fawcett paperback original made it look like a spy thriller, and Vonnegut sustained the illusion by introducing it by means of an "Editor's Note" signed by himself. Only later would the author use his own person to faciliate the storytelling. The first evidence of this technique in fact appears as the 1966 Introduction written for a later edition. From *Slaughterhouse-Five* on, it becomes an integral part of Vonnegut's method, and conforms to his new role of public spokesman. In *Mother Night*, however, it is the protagonist, Howard W. Campbell, Jr., who does the speaking, while Kurt Vonnegut as author keeps himself decidedly out of the narrative.

Robert Weide's strategy in recasting *Mother Night* as a film is to make it come across more like a work of Kurt Vonnegut's maturity. This involves identifying Howard Campbell more closely with the author and making his "confessions" less a routine of soul-searching and more an act of spokesmanship.

If the film of *Mother Night* is more outspoken than the novel, it is not just Weide's doing, but is because Vonnegut himself has become more outspoken over the years. Indeed, one of the film's major acts of cinematography is to identify Nick Nolte's portrayal of Howard Campbell in terms of Kurt Vonnegut's own physical characteristics. Even as a novel, *Mother Night* could be said to read differently today, given all that its author subsequently contributed to the world. Thus Weide's reading reflects how this 1961 novel is received by Vonnegut's public in 1996.

Specific challenges are met with this orientation in mind. A cinematic advantage of *Mother Night* over *Slaughterhouse-Five* is how the act of writing is made part of the plot. It is not Kurt Vonnegut struggling to find what to say about a massacre, but Howard Campbell sitting in a prison cell stripped of virtually everything except a typewriter and a ream of paper. The film uses an obvious device to indicate the present-tense of writing: prison scenes are filmed in black and white, while what Campbell writes about is done in full color. Just as in the novel, the focus shifts back and forth. Yet Weide's film enjoys an obvious advantage, for the crosscutting can be used for great emotional effect. Black and white is perfect for suggesting the prison's sterile, starkly confining atmosphere, and color is ideal for the richness of Campbell's memory. But it becomes an especially heartbreaking contrast when viewers see Campbell receiving the news that his wife has died entertaining troops on the Eastern front. As pitifully as Nick Nolte can portray grief at hearing the news, it is even more moving as the film cuts to the black and white scene of Campbell at his jail-cell typewriter, overcome by the immensity of having just written the scene that has been shown.

Hence viewers can appreciate the doubled effect of Howard Campbell's story: not just that he experienced these events, but that he is forced to relive them in writing his memoir. Here again Weide's cinematic choices enhance Vonnegut's theme, for the crosscutting allows not just Campbell's past but his ongoing life to be influenced by the nature of his textual production. Much of the past being recalled from the 1930s and 1940s involves the protagonist's occupation as a

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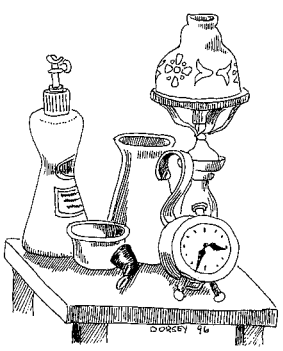
writer, first of dreamy romances for the stage, then of virulent propaganda for the Nazi government. Each type of writing involves a code, and each incorporates a factor in the author's beliefs. His dramas are predicated on the power of love to conquer all, or at the very least to provide a refuge from the world's evils; this is the "nation of two" that he creates, in drama and in life, for himself and his actress wife, Helga. So too does his propaganda have a secret, private message, as it is used to convey information out of Germany to Allied intelligence forces. Because there is a good person behind this façade, Campbell believes his phony broadcasts are just that: a sham, nothing that relates to the real person he is.

It is the nature of these writerly beliefs that the plot of *Mother Night* throws into question. In his novel, Kurt Vonnegut uses the apparatus of his "Editor's Note" to state the moral, something traditional fiction disallows a conventional author from doing. Even within this scheme Vonnegut as "editor" is careful to note that although Campbell himself wrote the statement, he excised it from the final manuscript. Thus Vonnegut has to cite it outside the text. Here Campbell sees his crime as having served evil too openly and good too secretly, having done despicable things while taking pride that a better self was hidden inside.



For his 1966 Introduction Vonnegut restates the moral himself: that a person should be careful about pretenses because they so often turn out to be real. By then, the author was at the point of incorporating himself as author into the body of his narrative fiction. This is just the technique George Roy Hill was unable to portray in his film of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. For *Mother Night* Robert Weide strengthens the writerly nature of Howard Campbell to make such struggle a large part of the movie's action. Campbell struggles, more apparently than he does in the novel version. And in that struggle he comes to reëxamine the nature and beliefs of his writer's art, itself a property of Kurt Vonnegut's later work. In doing so, Howard Campbell in the film of *Mother Night* takes on the spokesman's role Kurt Vonnegut has played in the years since the onset of his fame.

Weide achieved this aim not so much by changing Campbell as by strengthening the visual elements in the characterization of Resi Noth. When introduced early in the film as Helga's little sister, Resi is portrayed as a stark, stern nihilist. It is April, 1945; her home is about to be overrun by the Russian Army, and before she and her mother leave for Cologne (and the more amenable Western front) her pet dog, which cannot be taken along, must be shot. The duty falls to Howard Campbell, but Resi makes it "easy" for him by proclaiming her absolute disbelief in anything other than the finality of death. She even goes so far as to explain the source for this nihilism: that the only life livable to her was the role Campbell had crafted for his wife Helga in their nation of two. As she could not be Helga, what was left for her was something unwritten, something therefore utterly nihilistic.

In this scene the only thing childlike about Resi is her size. Everything else is uncomfortably adult. Her manner is brusque, even harsh. Her posture is stiff and unyielding. And her eyes, which draw much of the camera's attention, stare fixedly with the rigidity of steel. This is no child, the film tells us. This is not a person at all, but rather a character for whom no one has written a role. In a film rich with exceptionally good casting and acting, it is the most effective portrayal of all.

Then, in the film's greatest piece of dramaturgical success, this same characterization is reprised sixteen years later when Resi reappears pretending to be Helga. Howard Campbell accepts her as so, and the plot proceeds this way for twenty-four hours. But viewers, at the very least subliminally, will distrust Helga's presence, and not just for the way it miraculously contradicts history. This unease is triggered by alterations of actress Sheryl Lee's makeup and costuming and in the scene's use of color and lighting. In Campbell's memories from the late 1930s, Helga was all brightness and light; indeed, the view presented of Resi was so contrastive as to shock. Now, as Resi appears in the role of Helga, she is old enough and pretty enough to play the part. But her *look* bears nothing in common with the happy young woman of Campbell's memoir. Instead, her complexion is wan, her dress drab, tinged only with the same blue cast that chilled the depiction of little Resi. Most of all, it is her eyes—not the sparkling visage of Helga, but the icy stare of the nihilistic child of 1945.

VIRTUALLY ALL ASPECTS of filmmaking conspire to form this identity, from writing, directing, and photography to lighting, makeup, wardrobe, and acting. The purpose these efforts serve underscore Weide's interpretation not just of Resi, but of Resi as a factor in Campbell's art. In her confession of true identify the next day, Resi describes how as a refugee from East Germany she had the choice of remaining the nonperson she was or becoming the fabulously attractive Helga—so attractive because there had been a role written for her. At this point Campbell is able to reëmbrace his writer's credo from the 1930s, that a nation of two was in fact scriptable as a wholesome way of life—that pretense, in other words, could be quite beneficial. He accepts Resi as Helga, knowing full well that she isn't, and even accedes to her wish that he resume writing and craft a play for her. For the first time since before the war, viewers see Howard Campbell writing for art's sake, not history's.

And what a fraud it is. This is what Robert Weide's treatment of Campbell reveals. It is not just that he learns how his presumed friend George Kraft and even Resi herself

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are Russian spies working to kidnap him to imprisonment in Moscow. Nor is it that he must face this reality as revealed by his continual nemesis, the Office of Strategic Service agent who has consistently pulled the rug out from under all his fabricated identities. The fraud of his own writing must be faced when Resi wilts for lack of characterization, for the lack of a role she has wished Campbell to write for her. Not the play he would compose in Mexico—no, rather the motivation to "die for love" as the competing governments' forces close in to make their capture. Too late, he refuses to, so she dies by her own hand, for absolutely nothing.

This scene, filmed faithfully from the novel, has been made especially effective by the cinematic identification between Resi the adult, so happily hopeful in her role as Helga, and Resi the child, nihilistic to the point of having no personhood at all. The heart of Howard Campbell's writerly credo has been that pretense is a variable form of refuge from the world. Much of *Mother Night*'s action, both as novel and as film, has been to disabuse him of the notion that pretend-propaganda did no harm; a striking point in both mediums is when his arch-Nazi father-in-law tells him that even as a spy he could never have served the Allies as well as he served Germany, that it was Campbell's speeches that kept the Nazi ideal motivated after all other reasons to continue had failed. But even through the anonymity of his bleak postwar life, Campbell had clung to this belief's artistic correlation: that the romance of a nation of two was still workably worthwhile. It is Resi who counters that belief, and her behavior in the Greenwich Village of 1961 is all the more effective when so closely related to her more easily accepted nihilism of Berlin in 1945.

What Resi's behavior implies, Howard Campbell's spokesmanship expounds. Robert Weide need not rewrite any of the lines Kurt Vonnegut has provided for Campbell. The only major statement he makes not in the novel is the epigraph Vonnegut chooses for the much later work, *Galapagos*: Anne Frank's ironic conclusion that "In spite of everything, I still believe people are really good at heart." As bitter as these words seem within Frank's *Diary*, they are even more sardonic as a sentiment in *Galapagos*, where in order to escape its habitual inclination for doing evil things, humankind must de-evolve into a more simple animal state. As the cinematic Campbell speaks this same line to Resi and Kraft after learning of their perfidy, which is the story's ultimate betrayal, it serves as Weide's salute to Vonnegut's moral spokesmanship—that he knows just how bad people can be and also has some sound advice on how to improve things.

Throughout his work, the author has been skeptical of an overly winsome trust in the arts. He himself was directed to a career in science instead, and after studying the actions of biochemistry pursued a graduate career in the human science of anthropology. Beginning in *Breakfast of Champions* and continuing through *Timequake*, he preferred to celebrate not human imagination (in terms of contriving things—beware human contrivance, almost all his fiction warns) but rather simple human awareness, the self-conscious style of knowledge that among all animal life only humankind enjoys. In *Mother Night* his Howard Campbell is a more conventionally aesthetic artist; in fact, it is Campbell's motivation as an aesthete that corrupts his drama and his fascination with playing the ultimately tragic role of hero that damns the world with his propaganda. Thus when Campbell learns to question the nature of his art, it is Kurt Vonnegut's position that is being announced.

EXCEPT FOR HIS REFERENCE to Vonnegut's citation of Anne Frank, then, Weide need not write new lines for Campbell. What he does do in defining the role for actor Nick Nolte is to enhance Campbell's physical identity with Vonnegut, especially the Kurt Vonnegut known to millions as a public figure.

From the moment Campbell steps from the Israeli prison van in the scene that runs behind the film's opening credits, it is the image of today's Kurt Vonnegut that he conveys. Stooped forward, mouth hanging a bit open, hair mussed up and clothing rumpled, walking slowly with a shambling gate, it is the most familiar picture of Kurt Vonnegut publicized for the past thirty years. In many scenes Campbell even wears the author's trademark raincoat (on sunny days without a hint of rain). It is the classic look reviewer Robert Scholes described in his April 6, 1969 front-page coverage of *Slaughterhouse-Five* for *The New York Times Book Review*, a look that Scholes compared to the visage of Lot's wife. At Dresden, the reviewer suggests, Vonnegut looked into the abyss, and his sense of shock from that terrifying view has imprinted itself on his writer's personality ever since.

In his Bennington College lecture from *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons* Vonnegut ascribes his shift from optimism to pessimism to what he saw at Dresden but also to the news of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well. Today as a widely received speaker it is the image Kurt Vonnegut conveys: careless about his haircut, unmindful of whether or not his clothes are freshly pressed, and humorously apologetic about his inattention to the finer points of public speaking—all because the shock of the message he needs to convey outweighs these mundane particulars.

For Howard Campbell this transition from optimism to pessimism is underscored by Nick Nolte's appearance. Before the war, he is neatly trimmed and sharply tailored; even as a Nazi broadcaster his look is masterful and imposing, the essence of authority. It is in his postwar life that he assumes the guise of Kurt Vonnegut's public spokesmanship, and the film's constant cross-cutting between present and past emphasizes the physical cost this knowledge entails. In his prison cell, as he revisits the scene of his worldly education to the nature of mankind, the toll becomes even greater. By the film's end, he is

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quite literally a man at the end of his rope.

A final Weide gesture toward making Howard Campbell a writer-spokesman is having him hang not by a rope but with a braid made from his used-up typewriter ribbons. The Israelis have provided these as a prelimary to his trial, so that he can draft a memoir of his actions for use by the court. But there will be no judicial session, for in writing his story Campbell has tried himself and found himself guilty. In the novel, it is not for crimes against humanity but crimes against himself. In his film Robert Weide stops short of such self-judgment, preferring to let the watching prison guard make sufficient comment with a simple exhale of smoke, a reminder of his earlier comment of how strapping the legs of the executed Rudolf Hess felt exactly the same as strapping shut his suitcase. In comprehending the error of his art, Campbell has stepped beyond such distinctions.

Weide's emphasis on Howard Campbell's act of writing corresponds to Vonnegut's textual emphasis in the novel. For *Mother Night*, almost all information comes in written, even published form, and the film takes advantage of these plot devices for its exposition. After all, Campbell is being assisted by the entire research staff of the Haifa Institute for the Documentation of War Criminals. Yet there is a higher authority beyond textuality, as indicated by Frank Wirtanen's supposedly liberating letter. Meant to free Campbell, it is the final text that moves him to suicide, the final move of himself as a pawn that ends the chess game of his life.

Other cinematic touches not only credit Weide's faithfulness to the essence of Vonnegut's story but show how so much of that story derives from the popular culture of American life. John Goodman, in a role described as a cameo (he is not listed in the opening credits), melds his own public image with that of the character Kurt Vonnegut created in 1961 (when Goodman himself was a child); both Goodman and Wirtanen are familiar types, their speech and physical manner important for conveying the idea of how Howard Campbell's idyllic German life can be so genially interrupted by just what he doesn't want to hear from home. Wirtanen make four appearances, the last in the person of his letter to Campbell in jail, and each time his news disrupts the existence Campbell has so carefully fabricated. Alan Arkin's portrayal of George Kraft is equally adept, worldweariness as a broken widower matching up perfectly with the amorality of betraying a spy. Sheryl Lee's portrayal of both Helga and Resi suggests two entirely different characters, even as one pretends to be the other; her ability to calculate the difference and dissemble it qualifies her as a natural source for Russian espionage, the final issue of Howard Campbell's art.

Weide's neo-Nazis—Dr. Jones, Rev. Keeley, Bundleader Krapptauer, Black Führer Wilson—are ridiculously comic, just as Vonnegut describes them in *Mother Night* (where their ludicrous schizophrenia serves as a model for the totalitarian mind). In one understandable difference from the novel, Weide's real Nazis aren't very funny—there is none of the banality of evil such as ping pong tournaments with Hess and Goebbels and Adolf Hitler rapturing over The Gettysburg Address. In this novel and in *Slaughterhouse-Five* the author has sometimes been criticized for trivializing the Holocaust, and even though the techniques of both novels pierce more directly to the heart of evil (by showing Nazis not as cartoon monsters but as the human beings they were) it is doubtful that today's Hollywood industry could permit a major motion picture to be made that handled the Third Reich's leadership in anything but consistently condemning tones. A hint of Vonnegut's more comprehensive attitude comes in the portrayal of fellow-prisoner Adolf Eichmann: a disembodied voice (spoken by comedian Henry Gibson) whose cautious suggestions to Campbell reveal an utter ignorance of his own culpability.

In all these aspects Robert Weide's *Mother Night* benefits from Kurt Vonnegut's presence. From John Goodman smalltalking on a park bench to Henry Gibson's advice, so preposterous that Nick Nolte is given the motivation for the single hearty laugh in the script, almost every nuance is that of the author who restructured the nature of fiction with such novels as *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Weide had already immersed himself in Vonnegut's work, spending ten years researching, drafting, and doing the initial filming for a documentary on the subject, and this expertise shows in every frame. Had Kurt Vonnegut himself been trained as a filmmaker, *Mother Night* would not show much differently.

Central to Weide's understanding is how what was implicit in the author's 1961 novel has become a tenet of his public spokesmanship since the onset of fame. To everyone who has seen the physical characteristics of this image, Nick Nolte's portrayal conforms in closely sympathetic replication. Yet even if the viewer hasn't made the connection, Kurt Vonnegut himself cooperates in forging it near the film's end. After listening to Howard Campbell work his way through to a comprehension of Vonnegut's aesthetic and watching him comport himself with so much of the author's physical manner, the film audience sees this characterization brought to fruition as Nick Nolte, sprung from his last entrapment by the intervention of government intelligence, stands completely immobile on a city sidewalk, lacking the simplest reason to move in any direction at all. He stands here from noon into nighttime, passers-by drifting in and out of telephotoed focus as he remains motionless as a statue. The perspective, timed in very subtle slow-motion, is Howard Campbell's own. And into it, as one of the last pedestrians encountered, comes Kurt Vonnegut himself: shambling, stooped, somewhat rumpled and mouth slightly agape, rather suspiciously but concernedly regarding the person he has created. As their eyes meet, he and Howard Campbell are one, and the film is ready to conclude. □

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Far from the Ocean:
Robert Lowell at Iowa, 1953

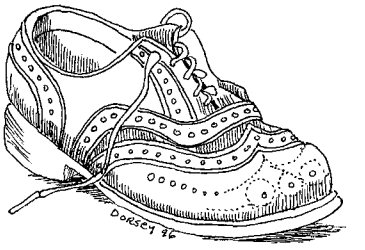
ROBERT DANA

O to break free, like the chinook
salmon jumping and falling back...

I LAST SPOKE WITH Robert Lowell, in the spring of 1974. He was to give a reading that evening in a plain, somewhat dingy little room above the bar at The Queen's Elm pub in South Kensington, a working class section of London. The event took place under the auspices of The Writers Action Group. But who the sponsoring writers were and why the reading was to take place in this rather unlikely venue I don't now recall, if, indeed, I ever knew.

I had neither seen nor talked to Lowell in twenty years. Not that that's so remarkable. Because when I was a student of his in 1953 at the now much praised and often maligned Writing Program at The University of Iowa, I was just that—a student in his poetry workshop. The writing program at Iowa was, at that time, the only one of its kind anywhere in the world, small, and not yet a point of focus for much of anyone except Paul Engle and a handful of graduate students. Lowell's class numbered about twenty-five. John Berryman, Lowell's successor, cut the class to a core of thirteen. The survivors included W. D. Snodgrass, Donald Justice, Donald Petersen, Jane Cooper, Shirley Eliason, Philip Levine, Paul Petrie, Melvin Walker LaFollette, William Dickey, Henri Coulette, and me. We certainly had, at the time, no sense of ourselves as anything special.

Our aims as fledgling poets were modest: to learn to write poetry well, and later to find a job somewhere, probably teaching literature. We were savvy. No poet we knew of, not Frost, not Auden, not Williams, had made a living from his art. We didn't, like later generations of workshop students, expect to go out and teach courses in creative writing. And we certainly didn't expect to be employed at prestigious and powerful universities. Any kind of college or university teaching job was hard to come by in the 1950s; moreover, our degree field was highly suspect. Donald Justice began his post-Iowa teaching career at the University of Missouri; Henri Cou-lette, at L.A. State (then a college); Paul Petrie, at the University of Rhode Island. Most of us kept those jobs the rest of our lives, except for occasional sorties as visiting writers to other more glamorous institutions. Children of The Great Depression and survivors of World War II, we knew how to dig in and hold on.



One of my workshop peers, Philip Levine, claims in his essay in praise of John Berryman that Lowell behaved like a Boston Brahmin, was bored to death with all of us and our poems, and played favorites in the classroom. I must have been even farther from the center of the action than I knew, because I recall neither his boredom nor overt acts of favoritism. If anything, Lowell permitted, whether from generosity or sloth, a wider range of what might be called "amateurism" than Berryman would allow later. In fact, Donald Petersen's description of Lowell's classroom manner seems to me entirely accurate: "...he praised what he could in our poems and diffidently suggested that we consult other poets' works, to see how it was done this or that way. He seldom suggested any specific revisions."

I think Lowell saw himself simply as our instructor, and us as his students, certainly not his equals either in knowledge or skill, even our passion for poetry not entirely to be trusted, so he did not encourage familiarity. At 36, he met all strangers, I imagine, with a certain natural reticence anyway. No doubt the notoriety brought him by the Pulitzer Prize for *Lord Weary's Castle* and an appointment as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, as well as by his personal troubles, contributed to his caution. He may also have been feeling still a bit bruised by the harsh response of the critics (including his long-time friend Randall Jarrell) to his most recent book, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*. In my own case, even if he had encouraged us to a bolder relationship, I certainly would not have been ready.

I WAS THE GREENEST person in the room, there in that corrugated steel barracks that served the workshop as both classroom and office. The barracks was one of fewer than a dozen remaining on the east side of the Iowa River after World War II had ended. There were one or two encampments of them elsewhere,

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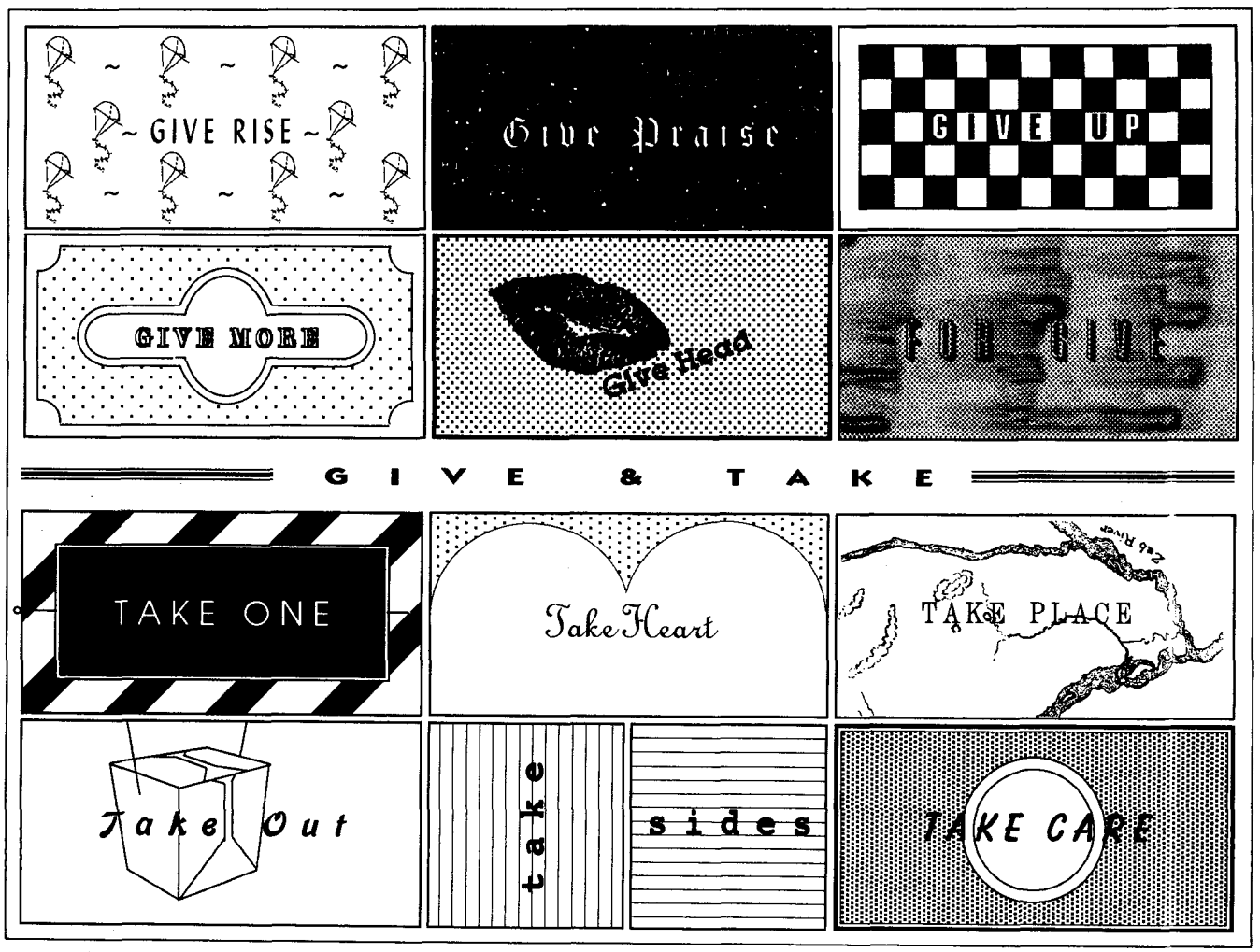
converted by the university into married student housing. None of the classrooms in these huts had air conditioning, so they were like bake-ovens on a hot day, and when the rains drummed down on them, all talk ceased. Paul Engle had managed to commandeer two of these buildings for his fledgling program; the Director's office in the main one was the only administrative office on campus that could boast a full-size bathroom with its own shower, and a toilet remarkable for its fiery hot water flush. Nonetheless, the workshop quarters were basically humble, and so was I. What I didn't know about poetry, the enormous amount I hadn't read, were facts borne in on me every day by the presence of my fellow-poets whose educations were far superior to mine, as well as by a string of brilliant mentors at Iowa beginning with Karl Shapiro and Wallace Fowlie and ending with Robert Lowell and John Berryman.

The next to youngest member of the workshop, at 22, I had a Yankee backwater high school education—good but thin, and a B.A. from a third-rate midwestern university. Donald Justice, by contrast, had a Master's degree from the University of North Carolina; William Dickey had a Bachelor's degree from Reed College and a Master's in literature from Harvard; Jane Cooper had done summer work at Oxford, attended Vassar, had her degree from Wisconsin, and was on leave from teaching at Sarah Lawrence.

I didn't live in Iowa City. Married student housing was booked up years in advance. I lived in a Czech section of industrial Cedar Rapids and hitchhiked 25 miles daily to and from the university, sun, rain, or snow. My first wife and I had been married only a year and were on our first car, a used '46 Ford, a wedding gift from her father. I had no family, and hers could provide us with only the most meager assistance, so we were living on the frayed shoestring her high school teaching salary provided and paying rent on a tiny two-room apartment in a little frame house. (John Berryman attended a party there once and commented to my wife that the bathroom was so small there wasn't even room enough in it to fall down if you got drunk.) I was in the workshop more or less on sufferance while I worked on an M.A. in English. In any case, in the 1950s, the writing program played no great role at the university. Kept on a short leash by a skeptical administration, it had at most only two or three assistantships to offer. It was a lean operation in lean times.

THE FALL LOWELL ARRIVED was marked by a sense among us that the ante had definitely been upped,



M. KASPER

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that the workshop was moving onto a higher level. The mood was one of excited uncertainty, a sense that we were about to be seriously challenged. Not that the workshop had not been staffed by accomplished and highly recognized poets before—Karl Shapiro was still editor of *Poetry* magazine, in fact, when he commuted in from Chicago by train for his workshop classes. Perhaps our sharply heightened sense of anticipation was due to the fact that Lowell's fame was still very fresh and because he was known to be a complex and difficult man. He had completed a hospital stay only months before, recovering from one of the psychopathic episodes that continued to plague his life to the end. Of course, he had the added cachet of his Harvard background; of having camped out in a Sears tent, in his student days, on the lawn of Allen Tate's house in Tennessee, until the Tates took him in; and of having studied with John Crowe Ransom at Kenyon College.

In addition, he was a Boston Lowell, related to both James Russell and Amy, a fact that probably played differently with each of the students in the workshop. Some of us—like Paul Petrie, Henri Coulette, myself—were not long out of the military, and had odd, mongrelly backgrounds distinguished more by luck and tenacity than by bloodline or old school ties. Without the GI Bill, we would probably not have come this far, or to this particular place. Our reactions were probably less matter of fact than, say, Donald Petersen's (who'd known Lowell at Indiana), or Donald Justice's or Jane Cooper's—more a mixture of curiosity, amusement, and awe.

I can still see Robert Lowell, sometimes, standing on the walk in front of the barracks—its large front window filled with a many-branched red geranium grown vivid and gangly and monstrous—smoking a cigarette, leaning slightly forward, talking seriously if briefly to one of us. He was a large man, fairly tall, somewhat stoop-shouldered, and wore rather thick glasses. In fact, the brightness of Lowell's eyes and the low, mumbling, almost lisping quality of his voice remain in memory almost as powerfully as the Pindar-like lines of the poems in *Lord Weary's Castle*. ("And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill. /The Lord survives the rainbow of his will.") The eyes, distorted behind the glasses, were thick-lidded, aquatic, or like those of a man looking at you through bulls-eye glass. The voice was surprisingly Southern, with a hint of fatigue or wistful amusement or complaisance in it. He was younger-looking than I had expected, and his clothes always looked as though he might have slept in them.

In addition to Lowell's workshop class, there was the more or less impromptu one we ourselves convened around the lunch table once or twice a week in the dingy and steaming cafeteria in the basement of the old Student Union: a kind of expanding and contracting court of complaint, a floating seminar in practical criticism, a rump parliament in literary theory, where we fed on each other's praise and harkened to each other's criticisms. Poems were handed around, sometimes scribbled on, lamented over. The talk was free-wheeling, unfettered, sometimes even preposterous. No telling how many bad lines and bad poems perished in those sessions. Probably not enough. But our little seminar brought us together in knowledge and ignorance and friendship. I learned an immense amount from my friends over those lunch hours.

Lowell's classroom demeanor was thoughtful and scholarly and marked by irony, off-handedness, and, occasionally, dogmatism distilled to arrogance. "Looking at things a different way was always difficult for him," Paul Petrie recalls, "though he sometimes made a visibly painful effort to do so." Certainly, there was none of the all-out, energy-charged passion sometimes crossing the border into the histrionic that was later John Berryman's trademark. Lowell was deliberate, almost ponderous on occasion. He would lean forward across the wooden desk, his ever-present cigarette sending up its slender ribbon of smoke, waiting for our comment or reply. Other days he was more relaxed. "At that time," Jane Cooper remembers, "Lowell still hadn't done much teaching, and he seemed like an amateur in the best sense. Studying with him was like listening to inspired gossip, full of brilliant almost casual observations of how a poem could be made....he always stressed what was most human in the work of contemporary and modern poets, most of whom he knew personally." His knowledge of poetry was broad as well as deep and his admiration for certain European poets, Rilke chief among them, was rivalled only by his respect for Virgil and Catullus. It may have been partly Lowell's influence that caused Henri Coulette and others to enroll in courses in the Classics department, and which caused me later to undertake a translation of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. He had a way, however indirectly, of pushing you.

I REMEMBER TWO conferences with Robert Lowell, although there almost certainly were others. The initial one was a kind of get-acquainted session. All of us in the workshop were asked to turn in poems we'd been working on that might make up a set of worksheets for upcoming class meetings. Time has mercifully wiped from my mind any recollection of the poems I handed in, except that they were totally inadequate. Poor, lame, shrill little creatures. Had I been more mature as a writer and more knowledgeable I would have been embarrassed for them; instead I was hopeful. Lowell was kind; he found an intensity in them worth mention. He talked about Hart Crane's poems and his own, and about how intensity, while of value, sometimes obscured what one was trying to say. "It takes time," he said, speaking of the process by which good poems finally get written, then added laconically, "You can't hurry it."

ONE DAY, IN A CLASS given over to

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talking about revision, Lowell surprised us by handing out dittoed sheets of one of his long and as-yet-unpublished, narrative poems—"The Banker's Daughter." It was an uncharacteristic act of humility. The poem, as he perfectly well knew, was so unfinished as to have some real clinkers still in it (e.g., "Ring, ring, tired bells, the king of Rance is dead...."). Nevertheless, he read it to us and then talked about European history and its possibility as subject matter and what he was trying to accomplish in the poem. "The Banker's Daughter," in particular, of his recent long narratives, had caused him a lot of trouble and indecision. He had already cut it by a quarter in the 120-odd line version he showed us. When he finished reading it, he said. "It's a bit too long, I think, and slack in places. Do you think it's turgid?" Donald Justice remembers someone said, "Yes."

A year or so later, I saw, in *The Partisan Review*, a very much shorter version—50 lines or so. And a year later, in another magazine, still another longer version. The version he finally printed in Part One of *Life Studies*, six years later, is about a third the length of the draft he presented to us that spring afternoon in 1953, with the result that the poem is more sharply focused and clearer. It was one of the last poems Lowell would write in his grand manner.

My last meeting, as a student, with Robert Lowell, took place at the end of the fall term. Everyone in the class had turned in "finished" work, and he was to offer a final opinion. I'd had a miserable season; my poems were still strained and clumsy and marred by melodrama and a lot of false emotion. I had a pile of ruled pages full of doodles and pencil-smeared failures. Most of one notebook was given over to a poem I was trying to write about my mother's death and the devastation that followed. I told Lowell that all I had to show him was the notebook and that there was nothing in it polished enough to be worth his looking at.

A week later, when I went in for

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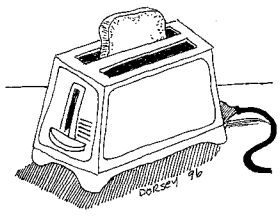
my conference, I found him, to my surprise, encouraging. It was during this meeting that Lowell suggested I try a narrative framework for the poem. Clearly, the lyric forms in which I'd been laboring so unsuccessfully were too narrow to accommodate the material I was trying to cram into them. Later, when I reached the privacy of the student union lounge or my library carrel and opened the notebook to see what comments he'd made, I found a 3 x 5 card tucked between two pages; the grade of B had been written on it in blue ink. Below it, the accompanying note read, "I think your writing is surely getting somewhere. It's hard for me to judge 'My Glass Brother' in its present form, but your language is intense and your stanzas are compact. You should write more, I think."

ROBERT LOWELL MAY have disliked his days in Iowa City. In fact, he commented openly on the "sterility" of the midwest on the dust jacket of De Snodgrass's Pulitzer Prize winning *Heart's Needle*. But if he found life in Iowa City "a pretty dormant, day to day thing, a rather rustic pastoral after Europe," he also found it remarkable for its "light, space, and cleanness." And in at least one letter to Allen Tate he wrote that his students were pretty good. Whatever else may be true, twenty years later, Lowell remembered this period of his life with pleasure and a certain amount of pride.



That evening in 1974 Lowell entered The Queen's Elm Pub in South Kensington in the company of half a dozen people. One woman, thin, pale skinned, and aristocratically beautiful, stood out. It soon became clear she was Lady Caroline Blackwell, his third wife. In her full-length fur coat she seemed out of place amid the scruffy audience of students and writers crowding into that dim, tiny meeting room above the bar. About thirty folding chairs had been arranged in several rows. And there were one or two other odd pieces of furniture, including a straight-backed chapel pew. The event had been virtually unpublicized, and it was clear the Writers Action Group wasn't expecting a large audience. Lady Caroline paused a moment beside her husband, and then took a seat in the back, at some distance from two silver-haired matrons of The Empire properly gloved and hankied who'd arrived early. Lowell had aged greatly since I'd seen him last. He was partially bald now and wore the remaining hair, now pretty thoroughly silvered, long in the back and on the sides in a kind of lanky tonsure. He seemed overweight and tired, or at least languid.

After a few minutes had elapsed and he was seated, I went over to speak to him. I hadn't expected him to remember me, and at first he didn't. Or if he did, it was only as part of a moment buried deep in the past. But then, his memory seemed to clear, and he began to speak warmly of his days in Iowa City and his class of aspiring poets, asking about Donald Petersen and recalling Phil Levine ("...he had a little diary about Spain, didn't he? Rather nicely written, didn't you think?") As we sat talking, we were interrupted by a young woman from Radcliffe who wanted him to sign a book for her. By way of introducing me, he said, "This man was a student of mine at Iowa almost twenty years ago. That was a great place. Only twenty students—all of them good. Most of my students from there have published books, you know." Then, turning to me, he said, "That was a golden time, wasn't it?" I hesitated a moment in mild shock, because like many others I'd shared for years the general myth of his unhappiness at Iowa. I don't know what I'd expected him to say, but it wasn't that. Then I laughed and said, "Yes, it was."

That night Lowell read only translations—of Villon ("After hearing Villon in the original French, I have a strong desire to revise it."); of Dante ("I'm going to skip the next six lines; it's prophecy and obscure...."); of Leopardi, ("Someone once said that, in his poems, the splendor of the writing overcomes the misery of the subject."). The group that had accompanied him to the reading were friends who'd assisted him with the translations, and they preceded him, reading the poems in the original languages: ancient Greek, Italian, French, German, and Russian. He himself read well, punctuating and emphasizing his commentary with what my wife later characterized as his "little boy gestures." A young writer friend, an American, who accompanied us to the reading that night, said that Lowell's brief introductions to each poem had struck him like "whole semesters of coursework;" and the poet himself, as "a broken man, a felled giant." Lowell's voice was the same low, melancholy voice I'd heard for the first time, nearly twenty years earlier, back in those converted steel barracks by the Iowa River, still strong if tired and a little slurred perhaps by drink or medicinal drugs.

At the end of the evening, my wife, my friend and I said goodbye, and Lowell signed books for us in his almost completely unreadable script. (I've only now figured out why his inscription has remained a puzzle to me all these years. Below the printed "*For Robert Dana/With Keen Happy Memories of Iowa/1952?*," he'd scribbled only his *first* name —"*Robert*") He rose from his chair then and asked how long I'd be in England, and said rather wistfully, or so it seemed, "Well, it would be nice to get together." But I was leaving in a couple of days for the States and he, for Italy. I shook his hand and thanked him for the fine reading. Then my wife and friend and I separated ourselves from the crowd, descended the dark stairs, and walked out into the chilly London night. I never saw him again. □

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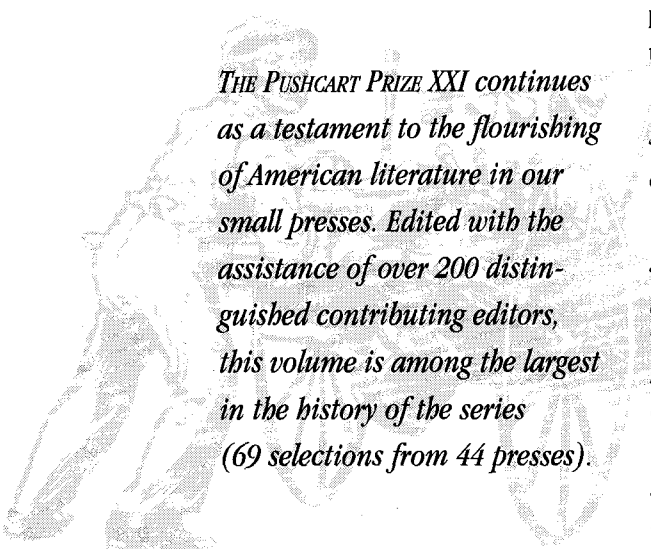

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